



The Commodification of Language in the Linguistic Landscape: A Case of Commercial Signage of an Urban Space in Korea

Kanghee Lee (Korea National University of Transportation)



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Lee, Kanghee
Assistant Professor, Department of
English Language and Literature
Korea National University of
Transportation
50 Daehakro, Chungju,
Chungcheongbuk-do, Korea
Tel: +82-31-460-0631
Email: kangheele0919@ut.ac.kr

ABSTRACT

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This study examined the linguistic landscape (LL) of Ikseon-dong, analyzing the use of English on shop signs from the perspective of commodification of language. The findings reveal that English is extensively employed in various forms of language distribution, arrangement, and combination with other linguistic codes on shop signs. In the commercial signs in Ikseon-dong, English functions as a marketable commodity, holding a privileged status in today's globalized world, particularly within commercial domains. It serves a practical role as a lingua franca for non-Korean sign readers, facilitating business promotion and market expansion. Moreover, in commercial signage, English acts as an influential marketing strategy, enhancing profitability and attracting customers by conveying positive symbolic meanings and adding value to products or businesses. English was used not only for shop naming but also as the sole medium of offering business details, thereby serving a strong informative function. This phenomenon is associated with the rise of English literacy and bilingualism in Korea, leading to Korean consumers' construction of modern identity, which is associated with internationalism, progress, and innovation. The study sheds light on the intricate socio-linguistic dynamics of the LL in Ikseon-dong, where English serves both as an informative tool and a symbolic commodity.

KEYWORDS

linguistic landscape, commodification of language, English, informative function, modern identity

1. Introduction

With the rise of globalization and increasing intercultural contacts, linguistic diversity, shifts, and adaptations have become common experiences for most language communities (Shukurova 2025). This evolving sociolinguistic landscape has particularly influenced linguistic ecology within linguistic landscapes (LL) across various contexts (Gu and Manan 2024, Liu and Ma 2024, Salam et al. 2025). LL is defined as “the visibility and salience of language on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region” (Landry and Bourhis 1997, p. 23). It has also been described as the “linguistic outward appearance of a place” (Backhaus 2005, p. 105) and conceptualized as a semiotic practice involving language use in “any (public) space with visible inscription made through deliberate human intervention and meaning” (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010, p. 2). The notion of LL originally emerged in the field of language planning within multilingual communities, where linguistic boundaries were demarcated by regulating language use on public signage such as billboards, street signs, and commercial advertisements (Landry and Bourhis 1997, p. 24). LL is shaped by various socio-economic and cultural influences. For example, it functions as a medium for expressing power dynamics among different linguistic groups in multilingual and multi-ethnic societies (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). The languages chosen for signage reflect the societal standing of those languages and signify “the relative power and status of the linguistic communities in a given territory” (Taylor-Leech 2012, p. 16). Furthermore, LL carries symbolic significance related to identity. In post-colonial nations, where former colonial languages have historically held higher prestige, the use of a national language in public signage can symbolize nationalism or signify political independence (Tsui 2004, Diallo 2010). Likewise, in multilingual settings, the presence of minority or ethnic languages in LL often conveys emotional attachment and serves as a marker of distinct ethnic identity (Cenoz and Gorter 2006).

Among various influences, globalization has played a crucial role in shaping language use and linguistic ecology within LL, contributing to the increasing presence of English as a lingua franca (ELF), particularly in commercial signage. The link between globalization and the widespread use of English in signage has been documented in numerous LL contexts. Kasanga (2012) highlights the rising prevalence of multilingual signage in Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s key commercial district, where English has overtaken French—the former colonial language—in both status and function. This shift is closely tied to gentrification, which has led to English replacing French in street names and addresses. Due to its global lingua franca status, English has become the preferred language in commercial and business domains, functioning as a commodified linguistic resource to enhance “the image of the city as tourist-friendly and cosmopolitan” (Kasanga 2012, p. 561). Similarly, İnal et al. (2021) argue that despite Turkish being the official language of Istanbul, the city has become increasingly multilingual as a result of rising migration and globalization, with English occupying a central role in mono-, bi-, and multilingual signage. While English holds no official status in Turkey, it is extensively used in code-switching, code-mixing, and translanguaging, serving as a key medium for communication with foreign visitors and immigrants from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Nikolaou (2017) also notes that English plays a significant role in Greece, a nation officially characterized as monolingual and ethnically homogeneous. In Athens, English signage is valued more for its symbolic rather than its informational purpose, embodying ideals of cosmopolitanism, sophistication, and modernity. As a result of globalization, Greece has moved toward an informal bilingualism with English, which dominates commercial signage in the capital. English signage appears across a variety of businesses, frequently alongside national or local languages as well as other foreign languages.

Globalization has also led South Korea (hereafter Korea) to experience significant intercultural language contact, accompanied by dynamic sociolinguistic changes and adaptations. The country has seen an increasing number of foreign tourists, migrant workers, and international students (Jung and Kim, 2024, Ko 2024). Data from the Korea

Tourism Organization (KTO) indicate that Korea received approximately 11.03 million foreign tourists in 2023, representing a 245% increase from the previous year and reaching 63% of the pre-pandemic visitor levels of 2019 (<https://knto.or.kr>). Additionally, Korea hosted around 181,842 international students in 2023, marking a substantial rise compared to previous years (Yin et al. 2024). The global popularity of Korean culture has further amplified Korea's presence on the international stage, contributing to the rapid emergence of multiculturalism in the country (Kiaer et al. 2024). These evolving sociolinguistic conditions have given rise to code-mixing and diverse translanguaging practices in the LL in Korea. In urban centers, particularly in Seoul, multilingual signage is prevalent (Lee 2019). To facilitate navigation for foreign visitors, city authorities have implemented bilingual signage, ensuring that street signs, directional signs, maps, and subway guides are available in both Korean and English (Fedorova and Nam 2023). Moreover, Korea's LL is heavily shaped by the commercial sector, with businesses, including restaurants, coffee shops, bars, corporations, shopping malls, and cinemas, incorporating foreign languages, primarily English, into their shop signs and advertisements (Al-Jarf 2024, Kim, J. 2022). English plays a dominant role in Korean LL, particularly in commercial signage, which is highly responsive to socio-economic influences (Trinch and Snajdr 2017). This study examines shop signage in Ikseon-dong, a commercial urban area in Korea that has recently undergone rapid gentrification. By exploring the linguistic dynamics of LL in the site, the research aims to understand how language is commodified as a means of adapting to socio-economic transformations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Commodification of Language

Commodification of language is described as “a shift from understanding language as being primarily a market of ethnonational identity, to understanding language as being a marketable commodity on its own” (Heller 2003, p. 474). It is associated with the way in which language has been rearranged for market purposes and regarded as an economic resource (Holborow 2018), and it is a key outcome of globalization and neoliberal ideologies. In the globalized neoliberal economy, marked by the promotion of market-oriented principles facilitating trade and finance liberalization (Holborow 2007), the foremost emphasis is on market expansion. This leads to a heightened significance of language in managing the movement of resources across extensive geographical distances (Heller 2010). The role of language is highlighted through diverse ways of reaching customers such as branding, marketing, advertising, or customer service communication. In the new economy, language not only serves as a powerful tool for making profits and attracting customers but also provides added value for a product or service (Heller 2003, 2010, Kelly-Holmes 2016). Duchêne (2009) argues that language has become a crucial means in the new economy, and communication skills serve as a lucrative and effective marketing tool at both individual and corporate levels. The commodification of language primarily describes how language as symbolic capital becomes “a marketable commodity” (Muth 2018, p. 222).

When language is perceived as a commodifiable object, language practices are managed and structured in a more cost-efficient and profitable way (Duchêne 2009). In the globalized market, the movement of resources is managed across linguistically diverse spaces (Holborow 2018). Therefore, multilingualism is prioritized in the globalized new economy, where communication takes place across linguistic and cultural boundaries, to accommodate the needs of shifting markets and customers with diverse lingua-cultural backgrounds. In the context of globalization, where an exchange of products, services, and labour takes place on a global scale (Heller 2010),

multilingualism works as “a driving force for market expansion and a competitive advantage” by offering customer-based services (Muth 2018, p. 223). In other words, given that in the globalized economy, there is a necessity to market products across diverse cultures and languages, multilingualism emerges as a vital tool that facilitates the process of producing, exchanging, and developing products and services within the new economy (Park 2016). Duchêne (2009) emphasizes that multilingualism is increasingly becoming a practical requirement in international markets. Therefore, numerous businesses demand a multilingual workforce to deliver customized talk, offer customer-friendly services, and satisfy customers, resulting in heightened productivity in the market (Holborow 2007).

Although multilingualism is identified as a significant promotional and marketing strategy in business, the commodification of language is intricately linked to the socio-economic conditions within a society (Muth 2018), and English has played a role as a *de facto* language in the current global economy (Kankaanranta et al. 2018, Nielsen 2020). Macias (2023) argues that English is the most commodified language “that leads to future economic advantages” (p. 84), and Park (2016) highlights that English has worked as a vehicle for economic opportunities, and as a result, English proficiency is regarded as a crucial resource in business, seen as “the most valuable of skills and abilities” in the job market (p. 460). Kelly-Holmes (2006) also underscores the significance of English in a commercial language practice, illustrating its ‘hypercentral function’ on commercial websites. She examined the commercial websites of global brands and revealed that English is most widely employed along with other supercentral languages such as Spanish, Arabic, or French to engage with their worldwide consumers. While the Internet has accelerated the spread of multilingualism, various multilingual codes are predominantly utilized in region- or nation-specific websites. Conversely, English takes prominence as the most prevalent linguistic code among other languages on the websites of global brands. English is extensively used in a wide range of commercial domains such as brand titles, slogans, product names, and product information notices. From a market-oriented perspective, where a linguistic resource “can be acquired, developed, and managed for profit” (Park and Wee 2012, p. 65), English has become a valuable resource for maximising economic profit, and it is evident that English is one of the most profitable and commodifiable languages in the global context.

2.2 Linguistic Ecology in Korea

Korea has historically been ethnically and linguistically homogeneous, with a relatively strong degree of monolingualism (Chang 2017, Park 2009). Korean is the sole official language, and it possesses its own writing system, Hangeul, invented in the 1400s (Park 2016). However, with globalization and increased contact with other nations and cultures, Korea has encountered more multilingual environments than ever before. Language practice in Korea, particularly, has a close relationship with its two neighbouring countries: Japan and China. Due to geographical proximity as well as close political and economic relations, Koreans have more significant opportunities for intercultural communication with speakers from these two countries. Japan has been one of Korea’s major business partners, with economic relations dominating trade until 2006 when China took over as the largest trading partner (Mukoyama 2012). As a consequence, Japanese held a top priority as a crucial foreign language in Korea, being the most popular language in learning after English, particularly in business and trade sectors (Kwon 2006). Furthermore, Japanese tourists comprised the highest number of foreign visitors in Korea until 2012, after which Chinese tourists surpassed them, becoming the largest group of foreign visitors to Korea (Jo et al. 2020). As a result, communication skills in Japanese became a requirement for tourism employees, and the Japanese language was prominently displayed in major tourist destinations and shopping streets (Lee 2019, Tan and Tan 2015). However, due to political conflicts and subsequent shrinkage of economic relationships

between the two countries (Vekasi and Nam 2019), the importance of the Japanese language has diminished in both business and education in Korea.

On the other hand, with the growing economic correlation and business cooperation, the Chinese language has gained increasing influence in trade, commerce, and tourism in Korea. Many Korean corporations and businesses require Korean employees to have communicative fluency in Chinese, and learning Chinese has become increasingly popular in Korea (Curran 2021, Paik 2018). As Chinese visitors and tourists constitute the dominant number in Korea (Jo et al. 2020), Chinese characters are commonly used in shop signs and advertisements in major shopping streets, department stores, and duty-free shops (Ding et al. 2020). Also, shop owners hire staff with communicative proficiency in Chinese to attract more Chinese customers and offer customized services to them. Since the rise of Korean pop culture, known as Hallyu (Bae et al. 2017, Lee and How 2022, Lim and Giouvriss 2021), the nationalities and cultural backgrounds of visitors to Korea have become more diverse. However, despite this diversification, the socio-economic influence of Chinese and Japanese is notably higher than other foreign languages in Korea. Chinese and Japanese are prominently used in public signage, such as street names, warnings, and directives (Chesnut et al. 2023), as well as in information announcements on public transportation, including trains and subways (Jeong and Kim 2020).

However, English holds the most dominant position in Korea compared to other foreign languages. This is not only due to the strong political and economic ties between Korea and the US but also because of globalization, which has elevated the significance of ELF. Globalization and neoliberal transformation in Korea commenced in the mid-1990s, as the state-oriented approach to economic growth, centered on exports, began to struggle against growing competition from emerging Asian nations (Park 2016). In this context, English was seen as the most apparent tool capable of facilitating the translation process. English has worked as a medium of economic potential, and therefore the importance of English is highlighted in the job market in Korea (Kim 2021, Kim et al. 2018). To promote competitiveness in global markets, Korean society has prioritized English proficiency, resulting in the phenomenon of an ‘English frenzy’ (Park 2009, 2011). This has caused excessive spending in the private education sector and an increase in early study abroad programs to English-speaking countries for young children (Jang 2023). In commercial sectors, English has been extensively employed for marketing, advertising, and promotional purposes, aiming to allure consumers with images of novelty, exoticism, modernity, and prestige (Ahn et al. 2017, Ahn and Lee 2020, Lee 2006, 2020). Holmquist and Cudmore (2013) report that approximately 60 percent of advertising in Korea include English words. As Muth (2017) argues, geopolitical, economic, social, and demographic factors impact the commodification and decommodification processes of language. Therefore, the dynamics of multilingualism in Korea demonstrates that the economic value of languages is negotiated, appropriated, and reproduced in shifting market conditions.

2.3 English in the Korean Linguistic Landscape

Prior research underscores the significant role of English is found in the LL of Korean commercial settings. Van Vlack (2011) notes that in many commercial areas of Seoul, bilingual English-Korean signs surpass monolingual Korean signs, a trend particularly evident in places frequented by younger generations. These findings suggest that English is primarily utilized to facilitate communication among Koreans rather than solely for international visitors. The preference for foreign languages, including English, is linked to their ability to attract attention and create associations with desirable cultural and commercial images. While the increasing use of English in Korea’s LL is influenced by domestic bilingualism, globalization and the growing number of foreign residents and tourists further elevate its prominence. Al-Jarf (2024) highlights that over the past 15 years, the English-speaking foreign

population in Korea has surged, leading to an expansion of English signage to aid communication in various aspects of daily life, such as shopping, dining, accommodation, and transportation. English shop signs also function as marketing tools, portraying businesses as modern, trendy, and aligned with global standards. Consequently, the adoption of English in commercial signage enhances a business's competitiveness and market appeal. In this context, English dominates both functionally—as a lingua franca for diverse groups—and symbolically, representing foreignness, cosmopolitanism, modernity, and prestige (Fedorova and Nam 2023, Tan and Tan 2015).

Another key factor influencing language distribution in the LL of Korea is the locality in which signage appears. Tan and Tan (2015) highlight that youth-centric and well-known shopping areas tend to feature a higher proportion of monolingual English and bilingual English-Korean commercial signs compared to residential neighborhoods. Notably, main streets near university campuses display more English-inclusive signs than monolingual Korean signs. Additionally, affluent commercial areas exhibit a greater prevalence of English signage. For instance, in Sinsa-dong—despite not being a tourist hotspot—over 70% of signs include English, with 52% being exclusively in English. This trend is partly attributed to the concentration of international brands and the presence of affluent, globally educated Koreans who embrace cosmopolitan lifestyles. Similarly, Lawrence (2012) argues that the linguistic composition of Korea's LL reflects social stratification, with English signage being more prominent in high-end districts compared to middle- and working-class neighborhoods. This suggests that the use of English in commercial signage is not only a linguistic choice but also a marker of socioeconomic status and prestige.

Even within commercial districts, specific local characteristics influence variations in language distribution on shop signs. Lee (2019) compared commercial signage in two of Seoul's most popular tourist districts, Myeongdong and Insadong. While Myeongdong is renowned for fashion and beauty retail, Insa-dong specializes in traditional cultural goods such as artifacts, pottery, tea, and clothing. English signage was significantly more prominent in Myeongdong, whereas Korean signs dominated in Insa-dong. This contrast is closely linked to business types; fashion and beauty stores, which often feature high-end designer labels and international brands with English names, cater to foreign tourists, leading to increased English signage. In contrast, dining establishments serving traditional Korean cuisine tend to favor Korean-language signs. Lawrence (2012) further supports this pattern, demonstrating that English signage is more prevalent in businesses associated with modernity (e.g., mobile phones), luxury (e.g., hotels, wine), and youth-oriented industries (e.g., beer, fashion). These findings indicate that language choices in the LL are influenced by the nature of the products sold, the socioeconomic profile of the neighborhood, the target clientele, and perceived economic status.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Site

Ikseon-dong is located in Jongno-gu, a district in central Seoul. It was the site of the palace where one King of the Joseon dynasty was born, and his offspring lived (Yoon 2021). As many traditional palaces in Korea were demolished by Japan during colonization, the area was ruined, and Seokwon Jeong, a construction developer, bought the site and built many Hanoks, which are Korean traditional houses, for sale. Since the 1920s, Seoul experienced rapid urbanization and suffered from a lack of houses for newcomers, so the developer built small size of Hanoks to customize the high demand of housing and sell as many houses as possible (Lee 2015). Consequently, a large-scale of neighbourhood with the urban type of Hanok was constructed at the centre of Seoul during the 1930s, and urban working-class people lived in the area since then. However, as the residences became

old-fashioned, the local residents made a redevelopment plan of the houses. Nevertheless, with the increasing awareness of the value of preserving traditional cultural heritage, Ikseon-dong was designated in 2018 as the Hanok preservation district, where the development is officially regulated and prohibited. Currently, Ikseon-dong has 137 Hanoks, which comprise over 60% of the total number of buildings and houses in the district (Lee 2023).

However, since the designation as a Hanok preservation district, many residents left the community, and Ikseon-dong has been converted from a residential area to a non-residential site, still in a process of constant change. Currently, only 13.1% of Hanoks are used as residences while 86.9% of the Hanoks are used for commercial purposes (Lee 2023). Compared to the fact that 68.8% of Hanoks were used for residence in 2015 (Yoon 2021), the figure shows the accelerating commercialization of the usage of Hanoks. The district has become commercialized and experienced intense touristification, which is the phenomenon where a community becomes a tourist destination (Estevens et al. 2023). The influx of tourists influences the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental dynamics of the community as well as its residents' daily lives (Ojeda and Kieffer 2020). Moreover, as touristification transforms the nature of the commercial structure and retail landscape of the community (Cocola-Gant 2023, Jover and Díaz-Parra 2020), it can impact the characteristics of the linguistic landscape of commercial signs.

In Ikseon-dong, many Hanoks are used as commercial facilities such as restaurants, cafes, bakeries, and clothing shops (Woo et al. 2022). The infrastructures and retail facilities for local residents including laundry, supermarkets, and butchers have been replaced by more tourism-oriented businesses. As Ikseon-dong is located at the centre of Seoul and neighbored by famous tourist attractions such as Insa-dong, Changdeok Palace, and Jong-myoo (Kim and Bae 2014), it has advantages to attract tourists and visitors as well as benefits of easy accessibility. In addition, Ikseon-dong is characterized by a unique landscape in which tradition and modernity are harmonized. The activities of dining and shopping in the traditional houses Hanoks can offer the opportunities in which visitors and tourists can experience traditional and classical atmospheres in the downtown area. Given that Ikseon-dong has recently experienced extensive touristification and commercialization, it can provide a valuable example of how the dynamics of language commodification operate in terms of linguistic landscape, focusing on commercial signs.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study was gathered through photographs of commercial shop signs in Ikseon-dong between October 3 and 5, 2025. While the primary focus was on analyzing English shop signs, non-English monolingual and bilingual signs were also included in the quantitative analysis to identify the overall distribution of languages and compare English usage with other linguistic codes. A total of 152 retail shop signs were photographed and categorized according to language type, combinations, and business sector. For qualitative analysis, a geosemiotic approach was applied, examining language distribution and code arrangement in commercial signage. Geosemiotics explores the interaction between language and place, emphasizing the social meanings conveyed through signs, texts, and discourses in specific spaces (Scollon and Scollon 2003). Widely used in LL research, geosemiotics offers a multimodal framework for analyzing linguistic, visual, and spatial discourses, encompassing three core semiotic systems: interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics (Karpava 2022). Interaction order examines the relationship between signage designers and their readers, considering the social and cultural activities that shape language use and interpretation. Visual semiotics pertains to the construction of meaning through the interpretation of visual elements that depict the material world, language, textual inscriptions, code selection, and spatial positioning. Place semiotics refers to the semiotic interplay of spatial organization and cultural geography. This study specifically focused on visual semiotics, investigating code preference and

emplacement to better understand the semiotic assemblages and meaning-making processes embedded within the signage.

4. Results

The quantitative analysis reveals the widespread use of English in commercial signage in Ikseon-dong. Across all types of signs—monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual—English holds a significant presence. Among monolingual signs, English (35 cases) appears at a similar rate to Korean (39 cases), accounting for 23.03% and 25.66% of the total, respectively (see in Table 1). The prominence of English in the LL is also evident in bilingual signage, which constitutes the largest share of language distribution in commercial signs. Korean-English bilingual signs represent the highest proportion (38.82%), and English is incorporated into all multilingual signs, alongside other linguistic codes such as Hanja (Sino-Chinese characters), French, and Japanese. The total number of signs featuring English amounts to 109 cases, closely matching the use of Korean, which appears in 112 cases. Overall, the extensive presence of English in commercial signage underscores its crucial role in shaping the commodified linguistic landscape of the area.

Table 1. Language Distribution

Type of language		Total (%)
Monolingual	Korean	39 (25.66 %)
	English	35 (23.03 %)
	<i>Hanja</i>	1 (0.66 %)
	Sub-total	75 (49.34 %)
Bilingual	Korean + English	59 (38.82 %)
	Korean + <i>Hanja</i>	2 (1.32 %)
	Korean + Japanese	1 (0.66 %)
	English + <i>Hanja</i>	4 (2.63 %)
	Sub-total	66 (43.42 %)
Multilingual	Korean + English + <i>Hanja</i>	7 (4.61 %)
	Korean + English + French	3 (1.97 %)
	Korean + English + Japanese + <i>Hanja</i>	1 (0.66 %)
	Sub-total	11 (7.24 %)
Total (%)		152 (100 %)

The relationship between language distribution and business types in Ikseon-dong exhibits distinct patterns. Restaurants and cafés/bars constitute the largest business sectors, with 51 and 40 establishments, respectively. The data suggests that dining-related businesses dominate the area compared to other commercial sectors, such as shopping-related businesses. Unlike commercial districts like Myeong-dong or Hongdae, where fashion and cosmetic shops frequently use bilingual or multilingual signage incorporating languages such as Chinese and Japanese alongside English (Ding et al. 2020, Lee 2019), the presence of non-English foreign languages in Ikseon-dong's signage is relatively minimal. While some shop signs include Japanese or French, their usage is far less

prominent than English. Dining-related businesses account for 110 shops, making up approximately 72% of all establishments (see in Table 2). In these businesses, Korean and English are the dominant languages, with Korean-English bilingual signage being particularly common. However, English signage is notably more prevalent in cafés, bars, and bakeries. While monolingual Korean signs are the most frequent in restaurants, cafés, bars, and bakeries tend to favor monolingual or bilingual English signage. This trend suggests an interplay between business type, target customers, and the commercial associations of specific languages in shaping the linguistic landscape.

Table 2. Language Use in Business Types

Business types	Language use				Total (%)
	Korean	English	Korean-English	Others	
Restaurant	21	4	17	9	51 (33.55 %)
Café/bar	5	11	18	6	40 (26.32 %)
Bakery	3	4	9	3	19 (12.50 %)
Fashion/jewellery	4	5	4	1	14 (9.21 %)
Hotel	1	5	2	0	8 (5.26 %)
Photo Studio	1	3	3	0	7 (4.61 %)
Game room	1	1	3	0	5 (3.29 %)
Supermarket	1	1	2	0	4 (2.63 %)
Taro shop	2	1	1	0	4 (2.63 %)
Total (%)	39 (25.66 %)	35 (23.03 %)	59 (38.82 %)	19 (12.50 %)	152 (100 %)

4.1 English in Monolingual Signs

English monolingual signage accounted for the third most common type of language distribution (23.03%), following Korean-English bilingual signs (38.82%) and Korean monolingual signs (25.66%). English-only text appeared primarily in shop names or in both shop names and business type descriptions, as illustrated in the following examples. In Figures 1-4, English monolingual signs are used primarily for shop names. Rather than serving an informative function for non-Korean sign readers, these English signs appear to have a symbolic role, as they do not explicitly indicate the business type. However, in some cases, as seen in Figures 5-8, sign readers may infer the nature of the business from the English shop names. For instance, the shop name in Figure 5, *Hang Out*, suggests its identity as a wine bar, reinforced by the accompanying wine glass icon. Similarly, *Look Optical* in Figure 6 provides a clue about the shop's function as an optical store. Moreover, English monolingual signage that explicitly conveys business identity, as seen in Figures 7 and 8, is commonly found in the research site. This trend is particularly evident in coffee shops and bakeries, suggesting that English conveys a certain positive image from a commercial perspective. Chesnut and Curran's (2022) study on Korea's LL, focusing on coffee shop signage, highlights that English shop signs and menus contribute to a more modern and cosmopolitan atmosphere, evoking notions of foreignness, aesthetics, and sophistication. They further argue that coffee shops with English signage often position themselves as experts in coffee culture, offering premium products and emphasizing authenticity associated with globalization and international coffee knowledge. Additionally, such establishments tend to feature higher prices, reinforcing a stylish and upscale brand image.



Figure 1. The Sign of a Clothes Shop



Figure 2. The Sign of an Accessory Shop



Figure 3. The Sign of a Self-photography Studio



Figure 4. The Sign of a Dessert Shop



Figure 5. The Sign of a Wine Bar



Figure 6. The Sign of an Optical Shop



Figure 7. A Sign of a Coffee Shop



Figure 8. A Sign of a Coffee Shop

While English monolingual signs are commonly used for shop names, primarily serving a symbolic function, English is also frequently employed to identify business types. In Figure 9, the shop name appears at the top in the largest font, with the menu offerings listed below in a slightly smaller font size. Similarly, in Figure 10, the shop name, *Richmond Dim-sum*, is displayed prominently, with the business type, *Chinese fusion cuisine*, written underneath in a smaller font. In both cases, English serves both symbolic and informative functions, as it not only presents the shop name in English but also provides business identification. Additional examples, as seen in Figures 11 and 12, illustrate how English conveys more detailed business information. Figure 11 features an English monolingual shop sign where the shop name is positioned on the left in a larger font, with a more detailed business description on the right in a smaller font. Figure 12 shows an English monolingual sign for a self-photography studio, a popular business among young customers in Korea (News Nate 2024, April 24). In this case, both the shop name and business type are written in English. Among the six self-photography studios in Ikseon-dong, all but one use either English monolingual or Korean-English bilingual signage, with only one shop sign written exclusively in Korean. Previous research suggests that English is particularly prevalent in businesses targeting young consumers, as it is often associated with youth, modernity, globalization, and cosmopolitanism (Benu et al. 2025, Gu 2024, Yan 2024). Consequently, English monolingual signs may be strategically employed to cultivate a more modern, stylish, and sophisticated image of businesses.



Figure 9. A Sign of a Coffee Shop



Figure 10. A Sign of a Chinese Fusion Restaurant



Figure 11. A Sign of a Kitchen Studio



Figure 12. A Sign of a Self-photography Studio

4.2 English in Bilingual and Multilingual Signs

English is also widely used in bilingual signage. Korean-English bilingual signs represent the largest share of language distribution in commercial signage in Ikseon-dong, accounting for 59 cases (38.82%). English appears in these signs either to display shop names, identify business types, or both. Figures 13 and 14 illustrate Korean-English bilingual signs where both languages are used for shop names. In Figure 13, the text is arranged vertically, with Korean characters at the top in a larger font, followed by a smaller Romanized version of the Korean shop name in English below. In contrast, Figure 14 presents a horizontal bilingual sign in which the English text appears on the left in a larger font, emphasizing the word *cheese*, the shop’s primary product. The Korean translation of the shop name is placed on the right in a smaller font. While the signs in Figures 13 and 14 use bilingual scripts solely for shop names, Figures 15 and 16 demonstrate bilingual signs that convey both shop names and business identities. In Figure 15, the shop name is displayed at the top in both Korean and its Romanized English equivalent, arranged vertically. In the middle section, Korean characters indicate the business type, referring to a snack shop, with an English translation below providing more detailed information. Similarly, in Figure 16, the shop name appears in large Korean characters at the top, while the business identity and menu are written in English on a round sign below, with the shop name also featured in English at the center of the sign.



Figure 13. A Sign of a Pub



Figure 14. A Sign of a Delicatessen Shop



Figure 15. A Sign of a Korean Snack Bar



Figure 16. A Sign of an Italian Restaurant

However, many Korean-English bilingual signs in Ikseon-dong follow a pattern where Korean is used for shop names, while English is employed to indicate business identity. Figures 17 to 20 illustrate this trend. In Figure 17, the shop name is written in Korean at the top in a larger font, while the main menu items are listed below in English in a smaller font. Similarly, in Figure 18, the shop name appears in Korean, with the English script identifying the business type, a brunch restaurant, written below in a smaller font. In both vertical signs, English primarily serves an informative function rather than a symbolic one, as it conveys practical details about the shop. Korean sign readers cannot determine the business type or identity from the Korean shop name alone; this information is accessible only through the English text. Figures 19 and 20 further exemplify this pattern, with Korean script used for shop names and English text providing details about the business type or identity. This trend highlights the widespread presence of bilingualism with English in Korea’s commercial sectors, reflecting the growing English readership and literacy in the country (Kim, S. 2022). This suggests that in commercial contexts, English has increasingly replaced Korean in performing an informative function or has been prioritized as a means of information delivery.



Figure 17. A Sign of an Italian Restaurant



Figure 18. A Sign of a Brunch Restaurant



Figure 19. A Sign of a Bakery and Coffee Shop



Figure 20. A Sign of a Thai Restaurant

The informative function of English in commercial signage is even more apparent in non-Korean bilingual signs featuring English, as English serves as the most accessible and intelligible source of commercial information for sign readers, as illustrated in Figures 21–23, which show Hanja–English bilingual signs. Hanja, a borrowed Chinese writing system, was historically used in Korea before the creation of *Hangeul*, the native Korean script, in the 15th century (Kim et al. 2021). In Figure 21, Hanja is used to display the shop name in a large font at the top, while English appears below in a much smaller font, serving as a translation of the Hanja name. Similarly, Figure 22 presents Hanja characters at the top in the largest font, followed by a Romanized version in English below. The business identity, *dessert café*, is also written in English at the bottom. Figure 23 features another example of a bilingual shop sign, where Hanja and English are arranged horizontally, with English providing a Romanized version of the Hanja text. In Ikseon-dong, some businesses operating within *Hanok*, traditional Korean houses, use Hanja shop signs, where Hanja primarily serves a supplementary and symbolic purpose rather than a direct referential function (Ding et al. 2020), conveying notions of ‘the Oriental sentiments, beauty, and traditional authority’ (Kim, E. 2016, p. 211). In these cases, English becomes the primary source of information for shop names and business identities. Given the decline in Hanja literacy in Korea over the past few decades (Ching et al. 2020), English now serves a more practical and informative function for sign readers, surpassing Korean in this function by mediating between the symbolic presence of Hanja and the practical need for clear referential meaning.



Figure 21. A Sign of a Bakery



Figure 22. A Sign of a Dessert Cafe



Figure 23. A Sign of a French Restaurant

The informative function of English is also noticeable in multilingual signs, as seen in Figures 24 and 25, where Korean, French, and English are used. In Figure 24, the shop name appears in Korean at the center, with its French translation at the top and English at the bottom indicating the business identity as a *French bistro*. While the French script provides a direct translation of the Korean shop name, neither

language conveys the business type or identity. This crucial information is provided only in English. Similarly, in Figure 25, the shop name is displayed in Korean, which is the phonological equivalent of French, in the largest font at the center, with the French version of the shop name at the top and the business identity in English at the bottom. The Korean word *블란서* (*pullanse*) is a phonetic transcription derived from Hanja that historically represented *France*. Since Hanja was used as the writing system for Korean before the creation of Hangeul in the 15th century, foreign words, including French terms, were transcribed using these Chinese characters. As a result, *블란서* (*pullanse*) or *블란서* (*pwullanse*) was commonly used in Korea to refer to France. Interestingly, the so-called *French* script at the top of the sign is not authentic French but a Romanized version of the Korean word *블란서*. Nevertheless, key business-related information, such as the type or identity of the business, cannot be inferred from either Korean or French on these signs; this information is conveyed exclusively through English. This highlights that the role of English in commercial signage at the research site is not restricted to a symbolic function but that its informative function is more significant, positioning English as the primary language through which key commercial information is made intelligible.



Figure 24. A Sign of a French Restaurant



Figure 25. A Sign of a French Restaurant

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the LL of Ikseon-dong, analyzing the use of English on shop signs from the perspective of commodification of language. The findings indicate that in the LL of Ikseon-dong, English functions as a marketable commodity, holding a privileged status in today's globalized world, particularly within commercial domains. It serves a practical role as a lingua franca for non-Korean sign readers, facilitating business promotion and market expansion. Moreover, in commercial signage, English acts as an influential marketing strategy, enhancing profitability and attracting customers by conveying positive symbolic meanings and adding value to products or businesses (Heller 2010, Kelly-Holmes 2016). The findings of the study reveal that English is extensively employed in various forms of language distribution, arrangement, and combination with other linguistic codes on shop signs in Ikseon-dong, an intensified commercial urban space in Korea characterized by a spatialized architectural heritage, Hanok. Monolingual English signs were frequently used for shop names, often without providing clear business identity or information. In such cases, both Korean and non-Korean readers may struggle to discern details about the businesses, suggesting that the use of English in these signs serves more symbolic functions rather than referential or informational purposes. As English, as a global language, is commonly associated with modernity, cosmopolitanism, and sophistication (Benu et al. 2025, Gu 2024, Yan 2024), the widespread presence of monolingual English signage in commercial spaces reflects market-driven intentions within

commercial discourse.

A key finding is the prevalent use of monolingual English signs in coffee shops compared to other types of businesses, consistent with previous research (Chesnut and Curran 2022, Rababah et al. 2023). Liao and Chan (2024) argue that coffee shops are often described as modern, exotic, and trendy spaces that appeal to young customers. More significantly, the naming of coffee shops is a trans-spatial practice that redefines these establishments as multifunctional sites, serving as a semiotic assemblage that conveys special meaning to customers. In other words, coffee shops not only offer coffee, food, and beverages but also create an exotic cultural ambiance where customers experience emotional and spiritual fulfillment, socialize with friends, and even engage in surreal experiences. Thus, the dominant presence of English in coffee shop signage reflects how English, as the most commodified linguistic code in contemporary commercial spaces, helps project the unique image of coffee shops as youth-oriented and emotionally engaging environments. The findings can also be interpreted with the notion of commercial branding, which functions as both a discursive and cultural dimension of the modern global era, where competing brands establish distinct identities (Hazaea and Qassem 2025). Beyond merely enhancing product visibility and market efficiency, commercial branding plays a crucial role in shaping and conveying identities. As powerful communicative acts, branding strategies engage with wider cultural and social discourses. By using language, symbols, and narratives, branding constructs meaning and identity, and in today's globalized world, the use of English serves as a key vehicle for projecting global brand identity (Bibi et al. 2024).

Another important observation is that English texts were not just used for shop naming but also for providing practical and referential information on shop signs, such as business type, identity, or menus. In many instances, English functioned as the sole medium through which business-related information was accessible, effectively replacing the primary informative role traditionally fulfilled by Korean in the Korean commercial sector. This phenomenon is not solely driven by Korean consumers' preference for English in commercial contexts but reflects broader societal transformations in Korea, including the expansion of English literacy and bilingualism. The nation's strong educational aspirations have contributed to the phenomenon of 'English fever' (Kim and Choi 2024), and the increasing societal demand for English proficiency in professional and academic domains has led to widespread bilingualism with English (Bolton et al. 2023, Lee 2025). Lee (2006) argues that many Koreans no longer view English as an alienated foreign language but as an integral part of their everyday linguistic repertoire, making simple English messages comprehensible to many Korean consumers. Additionally, Korean consumers use English to construct their 'modern identity', which is associated with internationalism, progress, and innovation (Lee 2006, p. 63). Being bilingual with proficiency in English is likely one of the most essential identities for Korean consumers to align themselves with modernity. When Korean individuals view themselves as bilinguals who know and use English, the language becomes a dominant and highly valued commodity in Korea's commercial market. As a result, the growing number of English-proficient bilinguals in Korea has significantly contributed to the rising prevalence of English in the country's commercial contexts.

This study contributes to the expansion of English linguistics research by providing empirical insights into how English functions within the broader socio-economic context of contemporary Korea, extending beyond formal educational and institutional settings. By examining English as both a communicative resource and a commodified semiotic asset, the study highlights the multifunctional roles of English in shaping meaning, identity, and economic value in everyday urban spaces. The findings extend existing discussions in ELF and sociolinguistic commodification by demonstrating how English is locally appropriated to perform symbolic, informational, and branding functions in a non-Anglophone context. In doing so, this study reinforces the view of English as a socially embedded and context-sensitive resource, rather than a neutral or monolithic code, and underscores the importance of LL analysis as a productive site for examining the evolving sociocultural roles of English in globalized societies.

Despite its theoretical contributions, this study has several limitations. First, its findings cannot be readily

generalized to or applied across other cultural or spatial contexts. Given that the research focuses exclusively on commercial shop signs within a limited urban area in Seoul, LL dynamics in other districts or cities across Korea may present different patterns and analytical outcomes. Comparative studies across various urban settings could offer valuable insights into regional variations in LL composition. Additionally, multilingual codes and discourses interact in diverse ways, shaping meaning and identity based on specific contexts and intentions. Future research could examine the long-term effects of English commodification on local language policies, consumer perceptions, and business practices by engaging with policymakers, shop owners, and sign readers, including both Korean and non-Korean speakers. Moreover, the widespread presence of English may not always align with the preferences of foreign visitors, as it risks diminishing the perceived authenticity of destinations by weakening their unique linguistic and cultural characteristics, particularly in heritage tourism areas. Exploring the perspectives of various stakeholders on multilingual and English signage would further deepen our understanding of the sociolinguistic roles and economic motivations behind language choices in commercial contexts. Since this study is based solely on an analysis of language distribution and arrangement in the LL and focuses on quantitative patterns and surface-level features rather than participants' lived experiences, future research could address this methodological limitation by incorporating interview data from sign makers, shop owners, and sign readers. Such qualitative data would enable a broader and more in-depth understanding of LL dynamics in Korean commercial contexts by exploring the meanings and intentions underlying language use in the LL, as well as consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward these practices.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Tertiary