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# Journal of Languages and Culture

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## ARTICLE

**An analysis of linguistic landscape of selected towns in Oromia:  
An ethnolinguistic vitality study**  
Alemayehu Fekede and Takele Gemechu

1

*Full Length Research Paper*

# An analysis of linguistic landscape of selected towns in Oromia: An ethnolinguistic vitality study

Alemayehu Fekede\* and Takele Gemechu

Jimma University College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Afan Oromo and Literature, Ethiopia.

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**This study investigates the strength of the ethnolinguistic vitality of different languages in Adama, Jimma and Sabata towns, mainly based on the objective of ethnolinguistic vitality score. A corpus of 900 signs were collected from the three towns, 300 signs each. The informational contents of the languages on signs were observed. Data were also collected using in depth interview with five linguistic landscape actors living in each town. Then the signs were given a value based on the presence and amount of information, and analyzed quantitatively. Ethnolinguistic vitality score system was used as analytical frame. Moreover, the collected signs were also analyzed qualitatively from the power and ideology perspective. The study reveals that Amharic scores the highest ethnolinguistic vitality score in the three of Oromia towns, followed by English. Afan Oromo's (Oromo Language) ethnolinguistic score is the least, despite the fact that it is the regional government's official working language.**

**Key words:** Linguistic landscape, ethnolinguistic vitality, critical discourse analysis, language shift, sign, Oromia.

## INTRODUCTION

Many studies show that a significant proportion of the world's estimated 6000-7000 languages are under threat (Crystal, 2000, p. 18). Accordingly, some linguists have forecasted that as many as 90% of the world's languages are in danger of extinction at the end of this century due to different factors (Foy, 2002, p. 11; Crystal, 2000, p. 18). However, all languages need to be preserved at least for the following five reasons: "diversity, identity, history, human knowledge and aesthetics of languages" (Crystal, 2000, p. 27-55). This is why language maintenance has become one of the priority areas of UNESCO (1996; 2003). According to Mufwene (1998), unless properly protected, "the loss of languages spoken

by smaller communities of speakers is an expensive price for humanity to pay" (p. 135).

In the Ethiopian context, there is no overt language policy that gives clear guideline to maintain languages within the current dynamic global world, despite the fact that the constitution guarantees that all languages are 'equal' and all ethnolinguistic groups have the right to develop their own languages (Constitution of Ethiopia 1995, Article 5).

Among factors contributing to maintaining languages in multilingual contexts, the visibility of languages in urban public spaces is becoming important. Many researchers in the area of language use in its written form in urban

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [guurii2006@yahoo.com](mailto:guurii2006@yahoo.com). Tel: 251911339596.

environments from the perspective of applied linguistics are stressing the impacts of languages on the sign as facilitating language maintenance or shift due to ideological and psychological messages the languages communicate to the audiences (Backhaus, 2007; Landry and Bourhis, 1997; Lanza and Woldemariam, 2009).

Therefore, based on the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality, which “is the sociostructural factor that affects a group’s ability to behave and survive as a distinct and active collective entity” (Landry and Bourhis, 1997, p. 30) within multilingual context, this study attempts to analyze the relative strength of some major linguistic groups residing in three Oromia towns (Adama, Sabata and Jimma), as observed from the languages on signs in the Linguistic Landscape (LL, hereafter) of the three towns.

### Statement of the problem

Studying LL of a given geographical area and analyzing the languages on signs is a relatively new area of inquiry within the broad area of applied linguistics. The term by itself was used for the first time by Landry and Bourhis (1997) in their study of LL and ethnolinguistic vitality of the French speaking area of Qubec, Canada. Using the study of LL it is possible to get relatively objective data regarding different aspects of language use problems, the status of different languages, multilingual practices, language attitudes, language related ideologies, and language maintenance and shift issues (Cenoz and Gorter, 2006; Landry and Bourhis, 1997). Of course, many complex factors are involved in the issue of language maintenance and shift or, in affecting the strength of vitality (Landry and Bourhis, 1997).

However, in Ethiopia, there is no such tradition of pre-assessing the situation of the languages, though many global studies warn us that many languages of the world will vanish at the end of the current century. In line with this, the main aim of local researchers has been not to contribute to the maintenance of our languages, but to document the linguistic features of the endangered languages for historical purpose (Zelalem, 2002, 2005). Though documenting has its own contribution, especially for a language on the verge of extinction, the current practical global and local influence show that many languages will be eventually assimilated, and result in subtractive bilingualism. Therefore, attempts at language maintenance need to be done. To this end, analyzing the ethnolinguistic vitality of linguistic groups is important to identify the strength or the weakness of vitality. From this perspective, there is no research conducted in the country, Ethiopia.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Coulmas (2009, p. 13), LL “is as old as

writing.” He argues that the creation of writing and urbanization stimulated each other, and the growth of urbanization demanded the use of languages on signs for smooth communication; for him this was the origin of writing in the public space. According to Coulmas (2009), the code of Hammurabi, which was the first recorded law from Babylon, the Rosetta stone, the obelisks from Egypt and the like were among the oldest historical language uses in public spaces. Though many researchers usually quote the definition of LL provided by Landry and Bourhis, there is a discrepancy in scope from scholar to scholar. Hence, there is no precise consensus on the definition of LL. In Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 25) “public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs” are stated as definitions of LL. Of course, language use on sign is not limited to the list they provide. To be precise, this study is based on the latter definition.

Ethnolinguistic vitality as a sociolinguistic concept was introduced by Giles et al. (1977). It is a characteristic that “makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in inter-group situations” (Giles et al., 1977, p. 308). According to the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality the communities or groups with a low vitality would gradually cease to exist as a distinctive community or group, whereas ethnolinguistic groups with higher vitality would have a more promising chance of existing as a different community or group. This means that if ethnolinguistic communities have very limited or no group identity within varied ethnolinguistic identity groups, they will be gradually assimilated by other groups and stop to exist as a distinctive group (Landry and Bourhis, 1997, p. 30). Giles et al. (1977) identify some influential variables which play a significant role in foretelling the comparative strength/weakness of ethnolinguistic groups in inter-group situations, especially in multilingual settings and, as a result, in the maintenance or shift of languages in a given area in the long run. These variables are status, demography, and institutional support and control.

Regarding the relevance of this theoretical model, Ehala (2009) argues that the diversity of the world’s languages is protected more if there is better and relevant data regarding their status as strong or weak. And, this could be based on “theoretical model of ethnolinguistic vitality...” that can reveal “the vitality of languages and to pinpoint the exact nature of endangerment in each particular minority languages (Ehala, 2009, p. 123).

Landry and Bourhis (1997) assert that the most obvious marker of the ethnolinguistic vitality of different ethnolinguistic communities residing in the same territory is the territory’s LL, because public signs in the territory’s LL express the different communities’ economic, political, and cultural capitals directly (p. 34). Hence, the issue of LL can be categorized under objective ethnolinguistic vitality. In line with this, Coulmas (2005) observes, “there is no more obvious way for a group to assert its existence

than by putting up billboards” written in the group’s language in the public space of their everyday life (in Backhaus, 2007 p. 55). Therefore, this is where the LL or signs written in public spaces and each community’s strength as separate identity come together

In this study four language categories are expected on the signs in the three towns purposely selected. These are: Afan Oromo, Amharic, English (with no speech community) and ‘Others’. To determine the relative power and vitality of each language category within the towns, numerical value is assigned to each language on a sign based on presence and the amount of information. This helps to quantify the ethnolinguistic vitality value for every language on signs or LL. According to Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 45), the linguistic landscape is a distinctive variable that contributes to the sociolinguistic character of ethnolinguistic groups and the salient marker of ethnolinguistic vitality. Therefore, the LL will be used as a technique to gather data on the subject of the vitality of the languages and the internal power and dominance dynamics of the whole population in the towns under study. The quantitative analysis system proposed for this study was based on dominance and visibility of the specific languages on different signs (facades, posters, banners, billboards and etc.). Thus, the analytical model used by Vandenbroucke (2010) is adapted.

Six values are attributed to the four language categories mentioned above based on the presence, and the amount of information presented on each sign to be analyzed. A different value will be assigned to each language on signs based on the four different types of multilingual and monolingual sign types and the sum of the value is six for a single sign.

Huebner (2009, p. 78) quoting Reh (2004) distinguishes four kinds of “multilingual information arrangement” on signs. The first one is called duplicating, and it presents all information in all the languages on a sign in a relatively balanced way. Hence, the value of two will be given for each if the languages on a sign are three, and the value of three will be assigned to the languages on a sign if the languages on a sign are three. The second type of multilingual language use on a sign is called fragmentary, whereby the information presented in one language is only partially presented in some other language or languages (Huebner, 2009, p. 78). Here, if the languages on a sign are three despite the amount of information provided, the value four will be assigned to the dominant language, and the remaining two languages share the two values left based on their own share. The third one is called overlapping multilingualism and, it presents similar information in at least two languages, but only partial content is presented in another language/s (Huebner, 2009, p. 78). Hence, a value of 2.5 will be attributed for each language presenting similar information, and the value of 1 will be assigned to the language communicating partial information. And the fourth arrangement is called complementary, where the information content of two or more languages is

completely different (Hubner, 2009, p. 78). By the same token, different values will be assigned based on the amount of information communicated in each language. Moreover, if a sign contains only one language, the value of 6 will be attributed to the language. The quantitative analysis is based on the framework explained here.

Moreover, language use on a sign is a result of discourse, and the sign by itself creates another discourse (Scollon and Scollon, 2003). According to van Dijk (2001), CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) considers the cognitive processes, as cognition negotiates between society and discourse. One of the major ways in which this negotiation is attained is through social representations; and this emerges from ideologies shared by a social group, or institutions. In this regard, ideologies form the organizational base of what influential institutions and group members think is right or wrong and act according to their belief (van Dijk, 1998, p. 8). By the same token, the language use on signs in the LL may be motivated on the basis of ideological orientations of influential LL actors. Therefore, the language use on sign may contribute to the strengthening of the hegemonic ideologies by the production or reproduction of specific social representations. Thus, this might have a role to play in strengthening or weakening an ethnolinguistic group. Then, it would seem that a CDA point of view would help as a complementary means of discovering the LL and some other complex social realities that have a role in shaping it. This in turn leads to how and why an ethnolinguistic vitality of a certain community is strong or weak in some areas. This further leads to the issue of gradual language maintenance and shift.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research sites

The purpose of this study was to examine the ethnolinguistic vitality of three towns in Oromia, (one of the federal states in Ethiopia) namely Adama, Sabata and Jimma based on linguistic landscape of the towns and other subjective vitality markers. These towns were chosen because urban environments generally catch the attention of linguistically and culturally different people. Particularly, due to their geographical setting, the towns are inhabited by linguistically heterogeneous groups.

Jimma town, found in the western part of the country is a suitable area for this type of research due to its closeness/proximity to the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region of Ethiopia, where more than fifty linguistic groups live. Hence, the language contact that in turn initiates language shift or maintenance is usually observed in such environment. Furthermore, as a commercial town, Jimma has been also attracting diverse ethnic and linguistic groups from all over Ethiopia. Consequently, according to Ethiopian Statistical Agency, (2007) (ESA, hereafter), from the total population of 120,960 residents of the town, there are 46.70% Oromoo, 17.1% Amhara, 10% Dawuro, 6.4% Gurage, etc. This source also verifies that, except very few, almost all Ethiopian linguistic groups live in Jimma town, even if their number considerably varies. Hence, with a population of very diverse linguistic groups, despite the fact that the majority of its inhabitants are Afan Oromo speakers, and the regional official working language is Afan Oromo (Constitution of



Oromia National Regional State, 2002), the town can be the right context for ethnolinguistic study based on languages on the signs in the town.

On the other hand, Adama town has become a commercial center because of its location on the main trade path of the country. It has attracted many Ethiopians from diverse linguistic places; and therefore, it is a home to varied linguistic groups. The total population of the town is 222,212 according to ESA (2007). From this, the majority is Oromo (38.6%), and the other major linguistic groups such as Amhara (34.22%) Gurage (11.8%) and Tigrie (3.3%) etc. live in the town (ESA, 2007). In addition, as a seat of *Caffee Oromia* (Oromia parliament), there is 'special attention' given to the town by the regional government. Therefore, Adama is also a multiethnic and multilingual town, suitable for ethnolinguistic and ethnolinguistic vitality study. In the same way, Sabata, from the central part of the country was chosen for this study because of its proximity to the capital city of the country, Addis Ababa. Sabata is a town under Oromia administrative region found at 26 kilo meters to the west of Addis Ababa. This town is also a home to many linguistic groups as many big national and international organizations reside there.

#### Data sources

The major data for this study were the photographs of language signs on facades, billboards, banners, graffiti, posters, etc. collected in an ethnographic way (a material ethnography in this case). This means, visual data consisting of photographs of languages on signs were collected from the streets of Adama, Sabata and Jimma towns. Moreover, the data were gathered from LL actors such as residents of the towns, sign owners (public institutions or private), sign writers, and concerned government bodies. They were interviewed to investigate their reactions to the written linguistic signs of the towns in relation to its contribution to weakening or strengthening the vitalities of the residents.

Therefore, this study of language use on signs from the perspective of ethnolinguistic vitality was not limited to the quantitative analysis of signs, as was the case in most LL research. Rather, more data were observed qualitatively from the signs and from varied linguistic groups via interview. Hence the data were supported with the insights from the insiders about language on signs. Based on this rationale, varied data sources (corpus of photographs, observation and interview) were integrated.

#### Sampling techniques

In this study, the decision of the geographic areas of the survey, the types of the items to be collected, and the linguistic properties of the signs were determined in line with Backhaus (2007)'s suggestion, which is purposive sampling. As the towns chosen for this study were not as such complex (medium regional towns), the main streets taking to/from the busiest business centers were selected. This was intended to make the sample signs representative of each town. The data collection focused on signs to the right and left sides of the streets and on signs placed or put for different businesses on different materials, visible at a reasonable distance to take a picture. On the whole, 300 private signs were collected from each town.

By the same token, as much as possible, all top down (government) signs, including different religious institutions' signs were collected. Because, many of the public offices are scattered and not located around busy areas of the towns, their signs were collected, wherever they are situated. Signs on paper and posted on windows, doors, walls, fences etc. were excluded. Generally, the

types of signs included in this study were based on the lists by Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 25).

Only data from fixed objects were included. Relatively temporary items such as signs on newspapers, T-shirts and signs on means of transportation were not included in the study. Moreover, commercial brand names, and commercial names that occur repeatedly in different branches, were considered only once.

Furthermore, some participants from the major linguistic groups living in the towns as confirmed by ESA (2007), were selected for interview. According to Dörnyei (2007, p. 116) and Cohen et al. (2005, p. 105) a snowball sampling technique helps researchers to identify few informants who can identify other informants who are relevant to participate, and these sequentially led researchers to other informants until adequate data are attained. This works best particularly where access is not easy because of sensitivity of the issue to be researched, or where there is difficulty of getting the right informant. Based on this sampling technique, within each town, there was an interview with five participants. Moreover, the concerned officials were also interviewed based on the purposive sampling.

#### Data collection tools

##### Photographs

Data were collected using photographs, and digital camera was used for photographing. The photographed language signs were then classified according to their characteristics of monolingual, bilingual and multilingual concepts for each town. These were grouped according to the four language categories expected in the towns such as Afan Oromo, Amharic, English and 'Others' for analysis.

##### Interview

The interview was designed to collect detailed data from participants about their feelings, practices, and beliefs about the matter related to the research objectives. Samples of all the major ethnolinguistic groups and some concerned officials and other concerned individuals such as sign owners and sign writers participated in in-depth interview of semi-structured type to let the participants freely communicate their ideas (Dörnyei, 2007). The researchers believe the interview helped to elicit the views of the participants regarding the contexts of the language use on signs, how language use on signs is supported by governments and other institutions.

#### Data analysis

The quantitative data about ethnolinguistic vitalities were calculated in Excel and are expressed here in an absolute number, a score. These absolute ethnolinguistic scores were gained by equating the incidences of a specific language in a specific subordinate, dominant or an equivalent position within the unit of the façade with a certain value.

The values were devised in a system that provides the language occurring in an exclusive position within the signage (i.e. a monolingual unit) with the highest value, which is 6. Conversely, when multilingual or bilingual signage is observed in the unit's façade, then this can be balanced, or not in terms of the amount of information contained in a particular language. Therefore, the value of 6 assigned for a sign would be shared by the specific languages equally, not based on the weight of the contents of both languages. Equivalent multilingualism includes a dominating language (value 4)



Figure 1. A bilingual private sign from Adama.

and a dominated language/s which is/are added to the dominating language (value 1/2). When relatively equivalent or equal multilingualism is met, all languages get the value 2. By means of this classification, the ethnolinguistic vitalities of Afan Oromo, Amharic, English and 'Others' (another languages) were calculated, not only for Adama, but also for the other two towns.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### LL results of Adama

The LL encountered in Adama is larger in size and number of instances than Sabata and Jimma. Most probably this is due to the fact that Adama is a highly commercial town. Here, it is even very difficult to focus a camera in the center of the town due to the forests of signs. Nevertheless, as the analysis shows it provides interesting tendencies for a comparative perspective. Figure 1 shows the ethnolinguistic vitalities of the languages displayed in the Adama LL.

The following picture is a bilingual sign taken from Adama, where the two languages on the sign share 6 points. But, as it can be observed from the picture, the contents of Afan Oromo and Amharic languages are not balanced; the contents of Amharic dominated the sign.

Therefore, the dominating language, Amharic in this case shares 4 points. On the other hand, Afan Oromo gets 2 point. Thus, the cumulative point is 6 for the sign. Similar procedure can be followed for multilingual and monolingual signs.

As Backhaus (2007, p. 41) describes, Barni and Bagna (2006) analyzed the LL of Rome, Italy, using ethnolinguistic analysis by means of a three-stage model which focuses on the presence of a language, dominance, and autonomy of the contents of the languages contained. Here, "presence" stands for the occurrence of a language/s in a sign. And, "dominance" refers to the language/s assigned the major part of the contents, or message to be conveyed on the sign. In the same way, "autonomy" stands for a language appearing alone on a sign (i.e. monolingual sign).

Therefore, this three stages analysis of Barni and Bagna resembles the different values assigned for the languages on signs in the current study (Table 1).

As mentioned earlier, 300 cases (photographic signs) were collected from Adama town. These photographs encompass 31 monolingual (13 Amharic and 18 English), 204 bilingual and 65 multilingual signs. From the bilingual signs, 124 were balanced, and 80 were unbalanced bilinguals. 85 of the signs were Afan Oromo with Amharic,

**Table 1.** A summary of ethnolinguistic vitality results for Adama

Language on signs	Language Category							
	Afan Oromo		Amharic		English		Others	
	No. of cases	Value	No. of cases	Value	No. of cases	value	No. of cases	value
Monolingual	0	0	13	78	18	108	0	0
Bilingual	188	549	167	510	51	165	2	6
Multilingual	65	93	65	165	65	132	0	0
Sum	253	642	245	747	196	405	2	6

and 26 of the signs were Afan Oromo with English, 11 signs were Amharic with English, and 2 signs were Chinese with English balanced bilinguals. However, 68 signs were unbalanced bilinguals with Afan Oromo and Amharic, where Amharic dominated in 37 cases, and Afan Oromo dominated in 31 cases. The other 9 cases were bilingual with Afan Oromo and English, where English dominated in all cases. The other 3 cases were Amharic-English bilingual signs, where English is dominating. As far as multilingual signs (Afan Oromo, Amharic and English) are concerned, from the 65 cases, 28 were balanced. 13 cases were English dominated whereas 24 cases were Amharic dominated. According to the data from the three towns, Afan Oromo was observed (in 31 bilingual cases with Amharic) as a dominating language on signs only in Adama town. This is due to some attempts of the town's administration to regulate the languages on signs. This was also confirmed by the interview with sign owners, those officials in charge of regulating the signs. From these signs the total value expected is 1,800. This is shared among the four language categories based on their presence and dominance.

Accordingly, the general LL result in Adama town for Afan Oromo reveals that there is no monolingual sign in the four categories of sign users (private, regional government, federal government, and religious institutions) considered in this study. Therefore, there is no value counted for this language, i.e. Afan Oromo. On the other hand, Amharic and English were observed as monolingual signs in 13 and 18 of the cases respectively. Moreover, the overall score for Amharic was 747 (the highest) and for Afan Oromo it was 642. From all these it is possible to conclude that in Adama town the ethnolinguistic vitality is highest for Amharic, followed by Afan Oromo.

This is a paradox due to at least three major issues. First, the town is among the major towns in Oromia, and therefore it is logical to assume the ethnolinguistic vitality for Afan Oromo is stronger than Amharic. But, the reality is the opposite. Second, Oromia has a special political interest on Adama, and thus, there were government interventions on how to use languages on signs, encouraging Afan Oromo to be visible more in the town.

Thirdly, (according to ESA, 2007) the majority of the residents are Afan Oromo speakers (38.6%) followed by Amharic speakers (34.2%), which means it is normal to expect Afan Oromo to be stronger there. But, the current reality is contrary to this fact.

From the photographic data collected from Adama town Afan Oromo and English are used more for a symbolic purpose than for communication. It means Afan Oromo is used to meet the interest of the regional government in most of the cases. And sign owners use English to associate themselves and the services they provide with a sense of modernity. Hence, the major role of signs in both languages was to serve a symbolic purpose. On the other hand, Amharic seems to play a dominant role as a sign for communication between sign owners and sign readers. This can be easily observed from bilingual/multilingual signs, which have additional contents in Amharic, in an attempt to provide detailed information on the services of sign owners. These types of contents were common not only on private signs, but also on regional and federal signs, also including different religious groups' signs. For example, the following (Figure 2) is an unbalanced bilingual sign that uses Afan Oromo and Amharic just to inform about the name of the business, and additional important details were given only in Amharic. This shows the role of Amharic as communication, besides the symbolic or ideological purpose associated with it.

Based on these data it is possible to interpret the role of socio-structural factors on determining the strength of ethnolinguistic vitality within the town. These socio-structural factors such as "demographic, political, economic and cultural" (Ehala, 2009, p. 125; Landry and Bourhis, 1997, p. 24) have a direct link with the issue. The total population inhabiting the research site (Adama) did not contribute much to help Afan Oromo grow stronger; which means the demographic capital's role became marginal here. In addition, the political capital of a linguistic community in the town seems visible on the surface. There is a support given by regional government institutions to use Afan Oromo. Yet, this did not work much, as one can observe from Figure 1. Rather, the previous governments' continued support for Amharic is still in place in most sign owners and readers' perception.



**Figure 2.** Unbalanced private bilingual sign.

They feel more confident when using Amharic on their signs not only for symbolic purpose, but also to communicate their message very well. They have also a feeling that when a sign is in Afan Oromo, it is not read by many. Most of them think they are writing in Afan Oromo because they are just forced by the regional government. Moreover, some perceive that the issue of using Afan Oromo is a temporary issue; something that may go with the changing political system of the country. This indicates the role of the other sociostructural factor, which is status that concerns a prestige level of every language in a certain diverse linguistic community. The federal and regional governments constitutions have given official status to Afan Oromo in Oromia; but most of the sign owners are not recognizing that. Of course, though they are limited in numbers, no federal institutions in Adama town are using Afan Oromo on their signs.

Thus, the attitude of fearing the use of Afan Oromo on signs is still in place despite the fact that different bodies such as mass media, educational institutions, government services, and politics are giving support for Afan Oromo's strong visibility on any sign. Therefore, if a language has a support from these governmental institutions, it means the vitality on the side of the speakers is very strong; and as a result, a better chance for long term survival of the language and their speakers is higher. This means there will be no much worry about the issue of the gradual loss of that language. However, the roles that socio-structural factors play in determining the strength of a certain languages' ethnolinguistic vitality seems marginal in Adama town. Private business owners' preference of Amharic and English is due to their perception of the languages on sign. As it can be concluded from the interview, "Amharic can be read by all regardless of linguistic origin, and English is preferred among the youngsters." Therefore, they think the two languages are enough to communicate their services to their customers.

This has led to the removal of the signs of private business owners by the municipality authorities, who want the presence of Afan Oromo for symbolic purpose.

Most likely this has a lot to do with a language policy of the country, which had favored Amharic to be the only language of communication both in official and non official domains under the pretext of building a homogenous nation, Ethiopia, for long period of time.

In 2000, the government of Oromia moved its seat from Finfinnee to Adama, because Finfinnee "has been found inconvenient from the point of view of developing the language, culture and history of the Oromo people." This is an example of political interest of Oromia in Adama. But, the ethnolinguistic score of the town has proved that Afan Oromo has lagged not only behind Amharic, but also behind English, the de facto second language of the country.

### **Ethnolinguistic vitality result of Jimmaa Town**

From 300 signs, 213 of them were bilingual, of which 136 of them were balanced, and 97 of them were unbalanced bilingual signs. Afan Oromo was balanced with Amharic and English in 39 of the cases; Amharic was balanced with English and Afan Oromo in 55 of the cases, and English was balanced with Afan Oromo and Amharic in 42 of the cases. However, 88 and 67 bilingual signs were dominated by Amharic and English respectively. Nevertheless, Afan Oromo was not observed as dominating bilingual signs with the two languages. The domination of Amharic and English were also observed in all (45) cases of multilingual signs. From these all issues one can conclude, the ethnolinguistic vitality score for Afan Oromo would be relatively lowest. Table 2 shows that the ethnolinguistic vitality score for Amharic was highest (874) and for Afan Oromo lowest (321). From the data

**Table 2.** A summary of ethnolinguistic vitality result for Jimma.

Language on Signs	Language Category							
	Afaan Oromoo		Amharic		English		Others	
	No. of cases	Value	No. of cases	Value	No. of cases	value	No. of cases	value
Monolingual	0	0	29	174	13	78	0	0
Bilingual	162	270	147	565	117	443	0	0
Multilingual	45	51	45	135	45	84	0	0
Sum	207	321	221	874	175	605	0	0

collected from Jimma town, no other language was found, except the three already mentioned (Figure 2).

The data from the interview also confirms that, there is a tendency of giving priority to Amharic and English due to aesthetic and space limitation on billboards to accommodate more than two languages. For example, one of the interviewees from federal institutions in Jimma town has the following to say: "When Afaan Oromo is added to English and Amharic, it becomes disgusting to look the sign; it lacks aesthetic. If they reduce the font size to accommodate all languages, there is something called perspective to view the sign. ... For the sake of accommodation, reducing the font size has a negative impact on reading." The private sign owners have also similar concerns; but it is associated with their linguistic origin. On the other hand, officials from Oromia Culture and Tourism consider these reasons as negative attitude towards linguistic pluralism, and lack of respect for the regional and federal law.

Therefore, this general ethnolinguistic vitality strength result of Jimma town confirms Afaan Oromo weakest, English moderate and Amharic strongest. The result is almost similar with the Adama case. In terms of the socio-structural framework that influences the ethnolinguistic vitality result, Afaan Oromo would have been strongest. But, the data show the opposite. According to this figure, Afaan Oromo's core for ethnolinguistic vitality would be higher based on the total population of the speakers of the language; but, this demographic majority did not work. Jimma, as one of the towns in Oromia, the official working language of the regional government is Afaan Oromo. Therefore, the government supports the presence of Afaan Oromo not only on government signs, but also on private signs. This shows that there are political and institutional supports for Afaan Oromo. As a result, many signs used by regional public offices use balanced multilingual signs, giving more prominent position to Afaan Oromo. But, few federal offices in the town, most of the religious institutions, and private businesses prefer Amharic and English. In fact, there is no pronounced government intervention to regulate the use of languages on signs in the town, compared with Adama.

English is a foreign language and there is no identifiable

group of speakers in the town. But, as a language on signs, it has dominated most of the signs, not only in terms of mere visibility, but also dominating the indigenous languages. Of course, it is not by any visible external pressure; but, by the choice of the sign users. Looking at the languages on sign one can consider English as a second language, not just a foreign language; though not recognized by the de jury. Whatever language is chosen, it is not unintentional; it had ideological implications. Public, private, and religious institutions prefer English to Afaan Oromo, and even sometimes to Amharic. Nonetheless, though few in number, there are institutions which prefer Afaan Oromo to Amharic or English. But, additionally Amharic or English are added to facilitate communication.

The ethnolinguistic vitality result for Sabata town is almost similar with the results in Adama and Jimma towns. Comparing just the three major languages on signs, the score of Amharic was highest, followed by English and Afaan Oromo.

## Conclusion

Generally, some of the most significant findings are:

1. Amharic is the strongest language in its ethnolinguistic vitality in the selected Oromia towns, which puts Afaan Oromo, the language that survived a century of suppression, at risk.
2. English is dominating the LL of the towns although Afaan Oromo is the working language of the regional government business in the towns.
3. The Linguistic Landscape of the towns does not reflect well the languages spoken by the speech community.
4. The linguistic groups, specifically the minorities living in the towns have less concern regarding the presence or absence of their language in the public spaces, mainly due to the attitude they have for their own languages.
5. The influence of the former linguistic discrimination that prevailed in the country for a long period has played a role in determining the strength of the languages.
6. Afaan Oromo and English are used more for symbolic functions and Amharic more of for communication

purpose.

7. The commitment of the government to strengthen the regional language is limited.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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