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Hirut Woldemariam* and Elizabeth Lanza

Language contact, agency and power in the linguistic landscape of two regional capitals of Ethiopia

Abstract: The issue of language contact in the linguistic landscape has been rarely addressed, especially in regards to issues of agency and power in this domain of multilingual practices. The linguistic landscape provides an arena for investigating agency as related to literacy, language rights and identity. In this article, we explore the linguistic landscape of two different regions in Ethiopia to provide an analysis of language contact that takes place between regional languages, which only recently have made the transition to literacy in the country as the result of a new language policy, and Amharic, the federal working language, which has a long and established history of literacy. The study is based on data collected through field work and participant observation from two federal regions in the country – Tigray and Oromia – two regions that have fought for the recognition of language rights, for Tigrinya and Oromo, the former a Semitic language like Amharic and the latter a Cushitic language. Results indicate ways in which speakers of the regional languages draw on their multilingual resources to create a new arena for language use and thereby assert their agency in developing new literacy practices.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, language contact, agency, power, literacy practices

***Corresponding author: Hirut Woldemariam:** Addis Ababa University.
E-mail: hirutw@hotmail.com
Elizabeth Lanza: University of Oslo. E-mail: elizabeth.lanza@iln.uio.no

1 Introduction

Studying language in the public sphere, the linguistic landscape, has proved to be a fruitful approach to investigating the sociolinguistic status of languages in multilingual societies (cf. Landry and Bourhis 1997; Gorter 2006; Shohamy and Gorter 2008). Indeed Gorter (2006) has referred to the study of the linguistic landscape as a "new approach to multilingualism". In more recent work, focus has

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been on signage in major world cities and its role in the construction of social and cultural meaning in urban space (Ben-Rafael et al. 2010). Little attention, however, has been given to the study of the linguistic landscape in urban sites in the Global South (but see Reh 2004; Kasanga 2010). Moreover, the issue of language contact in the linguistic landscape has been rarely addressed (but see Huebner 2006), especially in regards to issues of agency and power in this domain of multilingual practices.

The linguistic landscape provides an interesting arena for investigating agency as related to literacy, language rights, and identity. Agency is generally defined as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" and language is an important medium for investigating agency since language is indeed a form of social action (Ahearn 2001: 130). Although agency may be assigned to the individual, a group or collectivity dimension is implicated in linguistic anthropological approaches to the notion. For example, De Fina (2003) investigates identity as agency through dialogue and action in the narratives of border crossing by Mexican immigrants and illustrates a collective diminished agency for this group. Agency has been inextricably linked with the notion of power and this is illustrated well in critical literacy studies where issues of identity, power and access are undeniably linked with agency, as producing ". . . texts is a form of agency that enables us to choose what meanings to make" (Janks 2010: 156).

In this article, we explore the linguistic landscape of two urban yet peripheral capitals in Ethiopia to provide an analysis of language contact that takes place between regional languages, which only recently have made the transition to literacy in the country as the result of a new language policy, and the federal working language, Amharic, which has a long and established history of literacy and dominance. Societal conflicts among various ethnic groups in the country have left their mark historically; however, the new language policy of ethnic federalism in the country has contributed to a greater potential of regional and individual agency, and hence power, through an assertion of linguistic equality. Nonetheless, certain ideologies of linguistic hegemony from the past are often perceived to prevail through the apparent dominance and influence of Amharic in various domains, including the linguistic landscape of the two regions in question.

In the following, we will first present a historical background for language and literacy in Ethiopia, with a focus on language policy. Notions of power are indubitably intermeshed with ideology, with ideologies always being deeply rooted in history, particularly language ideologies (Blommaert 2005). Ethiopia's language policy provides the backdrop for evaluating the use of language in the linguistic landscape, as the current policy opens up for more regionalism in regards to language in education and hence literacy. We focus on two fed-

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eral regions in Ethiopia that have fought vigorously for the recognition of language rights: Tigray, in the far north of the country, and Oromia, a large region extending towards the south of the country. After the presentation of our methodology, we examine the linguistic landscape in the capitals of these two regions with a focus on language contact. While language contact work often deals merely with structural properties of language, a more functionalist perspective, as noted in Matras (2009: 4) rests on a view of language as social activity for which "bilingual (or multilingual) speakers have a complex repertoire of linguistic structures at their disposal". In conclusion, we offer various interpretations for our findings and their implications in light of agency and power.

2 Ethiopia: multilingualism and language policy

Ethiopia is located in the Horn of Africa bordering Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya and Eritrea. With a population of approximately 80 million, the country is multilingual, multiethnic and culturally pluralistic – a conglomeration of various peoples, each claiming a particular language (Levine 2000; Crass and Meyer 2008). As Trudell (2010: 404) points out, in sub-Saharan Africa, language communities identify themselves primarily with one language that also functions "as one of the most obvious markers of their culture". At present, Ethiopia's major ethnic groups include the Oromo, who speak a Cushitic language of the same name and who make up about 40% of Ethiopia's total population. The Semitic Amhara and Tigrayans (also referred to as Tigreans) comprise only 32% of the population; however, historically they have dominated the country politically. Despite the common Semitic background of the Amhara and the Tigrayans, their languages are mutually unintelligible as Amharic has diverged significantly from the other Semitic languages of Ethiopia due to the widespread contact with Cushitic and Omotic languages (Yimam 2004: xvii–xix). Amharic is used as a *lingua franca* by all peoples of various origins who have adopted it as their own language, regardless of their ethnic background. The historical hegemony of the Amharic language and a form of domination often regarded as ethnic in character demanded changes in official language policy (Cohen 2006). Language policy in Ethiopia has undergone significant milestones that have coincided with important historical upheavals in the country.

During Emperor Haile Selassie's reign (1930–1974), a process of *amharization* became institutionalised. The language policies of that era were aimed at producing an Amharic-speaking society and, consequently at discouraging the use of

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other Ethiopian languages. The development of written forms of language other than Amharic was therefore forbidden (Cooper 1976, 1989; Cohen 2006). Underlying this policy was the assumption that the use of one language would be necessary to produce national unity. Haile Selassie's government came to a dramatic end with the overthrow of the regime by a military coup and the transfer of power to a Soviet-backed communist junta, referred to as the Derg. Contrary to the former language policy, during the Derg regime there were some attempts at enhancing the status of regional languages. In order to conform to the ideals of socialism and to demonstrate political change, the military government of the Derg attempted to use 15 regional languages as part of the national literacy campaign. However, while regional language development was an articulated aim of the government, regional languages continued to be restricted to orality. Hence, the use of Amharic as the most prestigious language, particularly in literacy, continued nationwide.

In 1991, the country underwent a dramatic change in regimes and several major political, social and economic changes came about at the same time (cf. Pausewang et al. 2002; Smith 2008). The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the ruling political coalition in Ethiopia with the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as the dominating party, was responsible not only for the overthrow of the Derg, but also for other important changes. A new constitution advocating a policy of *ethnic federalism* was initiated. Accordingly, Ethiopia's Federal Constitution (specifically, Articles 5 and 39) guarantees that persons belonging to various ethnic and linguistic minorities shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture and to use their own language. Various proclamations have been made to undertake decentralisation of decision-making between central and regional administrations. Today there are nine autonomous federal regions, so-called ethnically based administrative regions, and two chartered cities, including the capital Addis Ababa.

Until 1991 Amharic was used as the language of instruction and literacy in primary education. After the downfall of the communist military regime, the newly formed government introduced a national educational policy based on the use of "mother tongues" as the medium of instruction in all public schools. The stated purpose of the policy was to foster national unity, identity and development while respecting cultural diversity. Yet the implementation of the educational policy shows that the regionally dominant language serves as the official working language and language of education throughout the region which is also a homeland for other minority linguistic groups. Hence "mother tongue" meant in reality and still generally means the regional language (cf. Duchêne and Heller [2007] on discourses of endangerment, including the need for mother tongue instruction).

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The introduction of the policy of ethnic federalism was based mainly on the recognition of the various ethnolinguistic groups in the country, and the official use of regional languages has as a goal to satisfy the diverse needs of Ethiopia's multiethnic and multilingual population. There is, however, no clear statement of language policy concerning how this goal should be attained. Rather it has been through decisions taken by official bodies that policies about the use of languages have been articulated. Today regional and local languages are widely used in the educational, administrative and judiciary systems as well as in the media. As a result, currently more than 28 regional and local languages have been manifested in written form in primary education, official uses, media print and in the public spheres. Tigrinya, Oromo and Somali (only very recently) are used in daily TV programs, while other local languages are used in the radio programs of the localities. Also, in the regional cities, regional and local languages have become visible in the public sphere, that is, the linguistic landscape – at federal and regional offices, businesses, shops, streets – a situation that is relatively new in the Ethiopian context.

3 The two regions in focus: Tigray and Oromia

Examining the linguistic landscape in two regions that have been associated with linguistic and social struggles can provide insight into the impact of language policy and the relationship between languages. In the following, a general introduction to current linguistic practices in various domains in each region is presented; this forms the backdrop for assessing issues of language contact in the linguistic landscape. As noted, the two regions have not been chosen randomly.

> As the two largest languages of the country aside from Amharic, Oromo and Tigrinya occupied and still occupy a special place in the debate about language rights and language use in Ethiopia. . . . Oromos and Tigreans were in the forefront of the demand for the use of their own languages in all the apparatus of modern life in Ethiopia. Language rights were conceived as one of the first and most tangible facets of the recognition of other ethnicities' rights. (Appleyard and Orwin 2008: 277)

The struggle for language rights invokes a power dimension associated with the use of various languages (Patrick 2007). Given the historical dominance of Amharic, one would expect a move towards divergence from that language in the assertion of various regional languages' newfound linguistic rights.

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3.1 Tigray and Tigrinya

Tigray Regional State of Ethiopia, which is mostly inhabited by people of Tigrayan origin, is the northernmost of the nine autonomous regions of federal Ethiopia, with the current estimated population at 4.3 million. This federal region, with Mekele as the capital and administrative center, is generally composed of highlands, although there are major towns and urban areas. Mekele, founded in the 19th century as a capital city by Emperor Yohannes IV, is a point on a major axis of urbanization along the route from Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa, to Asmara in Eritrea, and is located 650 kilometers north of Addis Ababa (cf. Tamru 2007). Since its founding, Mekele has grown to be one of Ethiopia's principal economic centers. The city has greatly flourished and expanded and a significant population growth has taken place making it the largest city in northern Ethiopia. According to *Census 2007* (the most recent available statistics), Mekele had an estimated total population of about 215,546 and a high population density. Given its significant growth and thriving commercial interests in the region, Mekele presents an excellent point of departure for investigating the linguistic landscape (Lanza and Woldemariam 2008).

Tigrinya, the official language of Tigray, is spoken by nearly 3 million people in the federal region. Despite Tigrinya's dominance in Tigray, there are other minority languages spoken in the region, including Afar, Saho, Agew, Oromo and Kunama, all of which belong to other non-Semitic language families. According to the language policy of the region, Tigrinya serves as the official working language and the language of education, used as a medium of instruction from Grades 1–8. Recently, Kunama (a Nilo-Saharan language) and Irob (also known as Saho, a Cushitic language) have been introduced as a subject in Grades 1 and 2 in the respective localities of the region. On the other hand, the role of Amharic in Tigray has been reduced and is currently only introduced to students as a subject from Grade 3 onwards. Furthermore, the basic curriculum calls for English to be taught from Grade 1.

According to *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009), relevant at the time of data collection, the literacy rate in Tigrinya as L1 was 1%–10% while in Tigrinya as an L2, it was 27%. No reliable up-to-date government statistics are available on literacy rates. Similar to Amharic, Tigrinya uses Ethiopic script, also called *Fidel* (cf. Abebe 2007). Tigrinya is also Eritrea's national language and since that country's independence from Ethiopia in 1993, the language has been developed with written material available. Tigrinya speakers in Ethiopia do not have access to this material as there is no political contact between the two countries and the borders are closed. Since the introduction of the new language policy in Ethiopia, the language is being developed and literacy in the language

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has been relatively speaking increasing, especially among the young generation in Tigray.

3.2 Oromia and Oromo

Oromia is the largest of the nine federal regions of Ethiopia, in both size and population, covering a vast area of the south of the country and with a population of about 24 million people. This region covers most of the territory of the Oromo people, who had originally migrated into the area during the 16th century and are now the largest single ethnic group in Ethiopia (Marcus 2002). The capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, is located in this territory and was also considered the regional capital of Oromia until 2000 when the Ethiopian government moved the Oromo capital to Adama, a city that is located along a major road in the region that connects the capital with other urban centers as well as to the port of Djibouti. This was a highly political move interpreted by some as an attempt to dissociate the country's capital with the Oromia region and its people; however, the government insisted that the development of the Oromo language and culture, as prescribed in the new Constitution, would be best accomplished outside the capital of Addis Ababa. Adama, the new capital, was previously referred to as Nazreth, as Emperor Haile Selassie had renamed the town after Biblical Nazareth. In 2000, the city officially reverted to its original Oromo language name, Adama, though Nazreth is still widely used. In 2005, following the highly contentious national elections that resulted in the victory of the opposition to power in the city of Addis Ababa, the regional government of Oromia was moved back to Addis Ababa although Adama remains culturally and economically the hub of Oromia. According to *Census 2007*, the population of Adama is 222,035.

Oromo, also known as Afan Oromoo or Oromiffa(a), the most widely spoken Cushitic language of the Afro-asiatic Phylum, is the official language of the federal region of Oromia. It is spoken as a first language by more than 25 million Oromo and neighboring peoples in Ethiopia and Kenya. Since 1991, under the new system of ethnic regions, Oromo has been introduced as a medium of instruction in elementary schools throughout the region (including areas where other ethnic groups live speaking their languages) and as a language of administration within the region. Oromo is written with a modified Latin alphabet called *Qubee*, which was formally adopted in 1991. As Pasch (2008) notes, the introduction of the Latin or Roman alphabet in Africa was the first attempt of mass alphabetisation on the continent. However, the choice of the Latin alphabet as the basis for Oromo literacy has indeed ideological roots and may be interpreted as an assertion of linguistic and cultural identity in contrast with the dominating Amhara and

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Ethiopic script. Since the adoption of Qubee, it is believed that more texts were written in the Oromo language between 1991 and 1997 than in the previous 100 years. Literacy rates vary across the different Oromo-speaking areas from 1% to 15%, according to Lewis (2009). As with Tigrinya, no reliable up-to-date statistics are available for current literacy rates in Oromia.

4 Language contact with Amharic in the linguistic landscape of the two federal regions

Amharic, the language that had enjoyed the status as the only written Ethiopian language in the public arena for so long, is still widely visible in the linguistic landscape of all regions and localities in Ethiopia. Many signs with regional languages are bilingual with Amharic. As the new language policy allows for the use of written regional languages in the public sphere, the degree to which these regional groups' language rights are drawn upon by individual agents, within a given region, is an empirical question. We now turn to our study, which is based on a critical observation of the linguistic landscape in the two regional centers in focus, Mekele and Adama, the capital cities of Tigray and Oromia regional states, respectively. First, we present our data collection methods.

4.1 Methodology

The linguistic landscape study of Mekele, Tigray, was part of a larger ethnographically oriented study on language ideology and use in the federal region in which both authors participated (see Lanza and Woldemariam [2008] for details). The authors engaged in participant observation of the linguistic landscape in the heart of the city. In line with what may be considered the first wave of studies of the linguistic landscape, an important area of the city was chosen, the main shopping district that was precisely demarcated by certain streets and squares, and photographs were taken of *all* tokens of written texts. A locally trained field assistant took digital photos of all tokens of environmental print found in the public domain including signs, names on buildings, advertisements, commercial shop signs and public signs on government buildings, amounting to a total of 376. There was no need for official permission to engage in data collecting; however, we did inform the local urban planning office, who expressed interest in the project. The shop owners invariably responded with curiosity at the picture-taking and when questioned, the field assistant informed them of the project. No objec-

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tions were raised to the activity. The data were subsequently categorised according to the frequency of representation of specific languages and according to the visual presentation of the languages in the material, polarised as top and bottom. Furthermore, ethnographic interviews with randomly selected shop owners were carried out along with the local field assistant during which questions were asked concerning language choice in the shop signs (cf. Malinowski 2008). Tigrayan shop owners extolled the use of the regional language, as noted in their own shop signs while those whose shop sign was written in Amharic were themselves Amhara.

The issue of language contact was brought up in Lanza and Woldemariam (2008) as an issue deserving further attention. Consequently, the researchers decided to investigate the extent to which such language contact involving Amharic was evident in other regions. Hence, the linguistic landscape of Adama, the capital of Oromia, was chosen and data were collected in a follow-up study undertaken by the first author. Initially, interviews and consultations were made with graduate students of linguistics at the University of Addis Ababa, who came from Oromia, in order to elicit their intuitions based on earlier observations. They received a general orientation on linguistic landscape research, and data indicating language contact examples in the linguistic landscape of Mekele were presented to them as a demonstration. The students confirmed that they had noted the same phenomena in Adama, that is, language contact between Oromo and Amharic. Subsequently, two graduate students who used to reside and work in Adama for quite some time were selected for fieldwork to take pictures of the linguistic landscape. Nearly 100 pictures of monolingual Oromo signs, bilingual signs involving Oromo and Amharic, and trilingual signs with Oromo-Amharic-English were collected. The overall linguistic landscape profile in Adama, though interesting, is not addressed in this study as the focus in this article warrants special attention to be given to signs demonstrating language contact.

We now turn to our analyses of language contact in the linguistic landscape of Mekele and Adama. As language contact is the unit of analysis, Table 1 presents a schematic overview of the languages in question; further details will be provided in the respective sections.

All three Ethiopian languages are typologically SOV languages (Subject-Object-Verb word order). In noun phrases, however, Amharic differs in word order as compared to Tigrinya and Oromo, as we see in Table 1. Shop names are typically noun phrases (NPs) and hence are a test case for examining word order in a language contact situation. In Section 4.2 we examine the shop names the owners used for instances of language contact between Amharic and Tigrinya in Tigray while in Section 4.3 we focus on language contact between Amharic and Oromo in Oromia.

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Table 1: Overview of the Ethiopian languages in the linguistic analyses

Language	Language family	Word order in noun phrase (NP)*	Status	Script
Amharic	Afro-asiatic: Semitic	Right-headed: Modifier + Head	Official *national* working language	Ethiopic/*Fidel*
Tigrinya	Afro-asiatic: Semitic	Left-headed: Head + Modifier	Official *regional* language, Tigray	Ethiopic/*Fidel*
Oromo	Afro-asiatic: Cushitic	Left-headed: Head + Modifier	Official *regional* language, Oromia	Latin/*Qubee*

* Except for a small set of Ge'ez originated compound nouns that are left-headed.

4.2 Amharic in the linguistic landscape in Tigray: the case of Mekele

Shop owners in Mekele used Tigrinya noun phrases not only with Tigrinya word order, but also with an Amharic syntactic pattern, as observed in the linguistic landscape of the city. While sharing basic sentential word order, the two languages exhibit a word order difference in their noun phrases, as noted in Table 1 (see Nega 2003). This structural difference occurs in noun phrases generally, as well as in compound nouns as shown in the two examples in (1). Note that the Ethiopic script has been transliterated in the examples.

(1) Tigrinya Amharic

a. *bet migibi* *migib bet*
'house food' 'food house'
b. *kilil Tigray* *Tigray kilil*
'Region Tigray' 'Tigray Region'

In (1), we see that noun phrases in Amharic are right-headed while their equivalents in Tigrinya are left-headed. Nega (2003) notes that right-headed NPs are not considered grammatical Tigrinya forms in the spoken language and their occurrences are believed to be in use due to the influence of Amharic (see also Reda, 2013). Information secured through ethnographic interviewing among Tigrinya speakers supports the claim that this type of language contact is not widely attested in spoken Tigrinya (but see below for an important exception).

In shop signs that involve more than one noun phrase or in structures that constitute a noun phrase embedded within another noun phrase, it was also common to find a combination of Amharic and Tigrinya structures. This means that either the main or the embedded noun phrase followed the Amharic struc-

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Table 2: Various syntactic structures of NPs used for 'stationery shop'

1) [*mədəbir* [*məsarihi s'ihfət*]] 'shop instruments writing'	[TIG [TIG]] Both the main NP as well as the embedded NP follow Tigrinya word order
2) [*mədəbir* [*s'ihfət məsarihi*]] 'shop writing instruments'	[TIG [AMH]] The embedded NP follows Amharic word order while the main NP follows that of Tigrinya
3) [[*məsarihi s'ihfət*] *mədəbir*]] 'instruments writing shop'	[[TIG] AMH]] The embedded NP follows Tigrinya word order while the main NP follows that of Amharic
4) [[*s'ihfət məsarihi*] *mədəbir*]] 'writing instruments shop'	[[AMH] AMH]] Both the embedded NP as well as the main NP follow Amharic word order

ture and, consequently, we find a range of structures reflecting both languages in one or the other component of the expression. As a result, apart from the NPs following the prototypical Tigrinya or Amharic structure, it was not uncommon to encounter structures involving either the main or the embedded noun phrase following Amharic structure. A case in point was the name for stationery shops, which sell office supplies, used by the shop owners in Mekele. The Tigrinya expression used for 'stationery', which literally means "writing instruments shop", involves two noun phrases: 'writing instruments' and 'shop ("selling place")'. This expression was realised by the shop owners in various forms in the linguistic landscape of Mekele, as presented in Table 2. In other words, the Tigrayan shop owners themselves chose a particular pattern while all four patterns were represented in the main shopping district, the site for data collection.

In Table 2, the four different syntactic structures are listed in the first column that were attested in the linguistic landscape for 'stationery shop', with the forms transliterated from Fidel, the Ethiopic script. Their respective syntactic structures are described in the second column. In all of the expressions in the first column, the lexical items are from Tigrinya.

As exhibited in Table 2, language contact in the linguistic landscape data includes examples of Tigrinya noun phrases following a typical Amharic word order (4) or containing a mixture of structures of both Amharic as well as Tigrinya (2 and 3). An example of structure (2) is given in Figure 1.

An example of structure (4) that involves a complete Amharic structure is illustrated in Figure 2.

In addition to the patterns listed above, we also came across a debatable structure that contains a Tigrinya prepositional element *nay-* that is used to express genetic relations within a noun phrase following a typical Amharic word

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Fig. 1: Language contact between Amharic and Tigrinya word order

Fig. 2: Language contact between Amharic and Tigrinya word order

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order (Halefom 1981; Nega 2003). An example of this structure in the linguistic landscape is [[*nay-s'ihfət məsarihi*] *mədəbir*]] 'of-writing instruments shop'. In this case, the element *nay* precedes the noun that modifies the head noun. According to some Tigrinya speakers who were consulted, who are also graduate students of linguistics at Addis Ababa University, the use of *nay* in this particular structure is not conventionally acceptable as grammatical since the relationship between the two nouns *s'ihefet* and *məsarihi* is not of possession but that of instrument or purpose. Nonetheless there is evidence that some variation in the spoken language does reflect this structure (cf. Reda, 2013). A plausible interpretation is that this structure in the written as well as spoken language may be the result of contact with Amharic, which would allow the possession marker *yə-* in a similar Amharic construction, yə-*s'ehefet məsarya* ('of writing instrument'). However, this structure will require further empirical investigation before any conclusions can be made concerning language contact. In sum, what we witnessed in the linguistic landscape is that Tigrayan shop owners, who decided to use Tigrinya in their shop names, have the choice to employ only Tigrinya word order or other options that involve Amharic linguistic patterns.

There is no official language policy concerning the linguistic landscape; in other words, there is no written decree that dictates which languages can be used in the public sphere. Nonetheless, as demonstrated in Lanza and Woldemariam (2008) concerning the general choice of language, language ideologies were consistent in promoting Amharic, Tigrinya and English to the exclusion of other local languages. Hence Tigrinya shop owners are indeed potentially powerful agents that can assert a language ideology through language choice. Even shop owners who chose Tigrinya in many cases also used expressions in the signs that exhibited Amharic word order, as noted in Table 2, either in the embedded noun phrase (structure 2) or in the main noun phrase (structure 3) or even at both levels (structure 4). As noted earlier, Amharic historically was the only Ethiopian language used in literacy and in the written public sphere. Moreover, a pervasive language ideology in Ethiopia holds that Amharic still exerts linguistic influence in the area and, consequently, structural dominance in certain linguistic practices in Mekele – an ideology that would undermine the agency and hence power of the Tigrayans in asserting language rights. We will return to this issue.

4.3 Amharic in the linguistic landscape of Oromia: the case of Adama

The linguistic landscape in Oromia was observed in Adama, the capital city of the region, which is located 100 kilometres southeast of Addis Ababa. Like the

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situation in Mekele, the linguistic landscape in Adama exhibits three languages: the national language, Amharic; the regional language, Oromo; and English, the *de facto* official second language. In addition, English transliterations of Amharic and Oromo expressions are also found. Of the signs examined in the main street of Adama, the great majority made use of Amharic, either in combination with English and/or Oromo, and never alone. Amharic appeared in trilingual as well as bilingual signs while there were only a few Oromo monolingual signs. Nonetheless the vertical placement order of languages used in trilingual signs is Oromo, Amharic and English respectively, hence attributing more prominence to Oromo (see Figure 3).

As in the case with Mekele, it is interesting to see that Amharic not only has high visibility in the linguistic landscape in Adama, it also enters into the signs of shop owners in their written Oromo. Hence the situation in the two regional capitals is similar, despite the fact that Oromo and Amharic belong to two different language families (cf. Table 1). While Tigrinya and Amharic are both Semitic languages written in Ethiopic script, or Fidel, Oromo is a Cushitic language, written with a modified form of the Latin alphabet, as noted above. Significantly, this alphabet was chosen by the Oromo people in order to assert an independent identity from Amharic, once the language policy of ethnic federalism paved the way for literacy in other Ethiopian languages, particularly in education. Prior to 1991, during the literacy campaign under the Derg (see Section 2), any texts in Oromo were written in Fidel.

As demonstrated in Mekele, shop owners in Adama also employed noun phrases for names of shops and business centres in which Amharic word order was involved. Moreover, the written Oromo appearing in the linguistic landscape of Adama also reflected certain elements of the phonological and morphological properties of Amharic. As noted, Amharic and Oromo are genetically unrelated and typologically different languages, yet speakers of these languages have been in close contact in Ethiopia due to historical and sociopolitical factors and hence their languages have been able to influence each other over the centuries. It is in fact believed that Amharic borrowed a number of phonological and lexical features from Cushitic languages. Affricate consonants in Amharic, for instance, are the result of such an historical language contact (see Yimam 2004: xvi). However, in Adama Amharic is perceived by many to exert an influence on the other Ethiopian languages, at least in the written domain. Once again the noun phrases used by the shop owners in their signs created the context for genitive constructions. As noted in Table 1, Oromo and Amharic differ in the way noun phrases are formed. And, as in Mekele, we witnessed signs in which shop owners chose structures involving language contact. Before we present examples in the linguistic landscape of this phenomenon, let us first examine the structure of

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noun phrases and specifically that of the genitive noun phrase in the two languages to illustrate how shop owners not only employ word order but also phonological and morphological properties of Amharic in signs with Oromo lexical items.

In Oromo the genitive is usually formed by lengthening a final short vowel of the possessor noun by adding *-ii* to its final consonant, or by leaving its final long vowel unchanged, features that are also reflected in writing. The possessor noun follows the possessed noun in a genitive phrase (see Owens 1985: 122–124), as noted in (2).

(2) *obboleetti* *namichaa*
sister man (Definite)
'the man's sister'

In Amharic, on the other hand, the opposite order of constituents is used in the noun phrase with the qualifier adjective preceding the head noun. In a genitive noun phrase in Amharic, the possessor is followed by the possessed noun, as in English. In addition, the use of the prefixal element *yə-* affixed to a genitive noun is a typical feature in Amharic, as noted above (Yimam 2004: 101). In the linguistic landscape of Adama, however, one may find a genitive noun phrase in Oromo framed within the structure of Amharic. In some cases, one can even come across the Amharic genitive marking element, *yə-*, used with an Oromo expression (see Figure 4, note the spelling with *ya*.). For instance, in a monolingual sign of a cafeteria, the shop owner wrote the name of the cafeteria as *ADAAMAA KAFI-TEERIYAA* 'Adama Cafeteria', illustrating such a genitive construction with lexical items following Oromo written conventions yet put into the structure of Amharic. We may say that the shop owner has transliterated Amharic into the Oromo phonological make up and Qubee, the Oromo modified Latin orthography. Further sociolinguistic research is needed to investigate the authorship of these signs, the decisions made during the construction of the signs, and how persons in the landscape read and react to them. In this section, we attest to the general patterns that we found in the linguistic landscape in Adama interpreted in light of participant observations and our field workers' reports.

In a complex noun phrase, which allows an embedded noun phrase to appear within a noun phrase, it is common to see some sort of structural hybrid of Oromo and Amharic, as was noted with Tigrinya in Table 2. In such a construction, some part of the phrase, either the embedded or the main phrase, tends to follow the structure of Amharic while the other part follows that of Oromo. Hence cases of structural language contact are attested in the linguistic landscape in Adama. See Figure 3 for an example of this point in discussion.

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Fig. 3: Language contact in an Oromo and Amharic sign

In the sign illustrated in Figure 3, the shop owner has used an Oromo noun phrase, *Meeshaalee Aadaa Gurgurtaa Maatii*, ('Maatii cultural objects/souvenir shop') in which the main phrase (*Meeshaale maatii* 'Maati shop') follows Oromo word order while the embedded noun phrase, *Aadaa Gurgurtaa* ('cultural objects'), follows Amharic word order. This renders a hybrid Oromo/Amharic phrase structure, as indicated in (3).

(3) Hybrid Oromo and Amharic construction

Sign:

[*Meeshaalee*	[*Aadaa*	*Gurgurtaa*]$_{\text{Amharic}}$	*Maatii*]$_{\text{Oromo}}$
shop	[cultural	objects]	Maati (name of a person)

Conventional Oromo structure:

[*Meeshaalee*	[*Gurgurtaa*	*Aadaa*]$_{\text{Oromo}}$	*Maatii*]$_{\text{Oromo}}$
shop	[objects	cultural]	Maati

'Maatii cultural objects/souvenir shop'

As illustrated in (3), the phrase begins with the conventional Oromo word order but involves Amharic order in the structure of the embedded phrase. The shop owner who was Oromo has thus employed both languages on his shop sign although the lexical items are from Oromo.

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On the other hand, we have examples in which shop owners use a phrase structure that begins with the pattern of Amharic in its main phrase but dons the conventional Oromo structure within the embedded phrase. For example, a qualifier of a complex phrase which is expected to occur at the end of the phrase occurs at the beginning of the structure, as it occurs in Amharic, while the embedded phrase that occurs inside the structure follows the conventional word order of Oromo, as shown in (4).

(4) Hybrid Oromo and Amharic construction

Sign:

[*Adaamaa*	[*Meeshaa*	*Seeraamikii*]$_{\text{Oromo}}$]$_{\text{Amharic}}$
Adama	selling	ceramics

Conventional Oromo structure:

[[*Meeshaa*	*Seeraamikii*]	*Adaamaa*]
selling	ceramics	Adaama

'Adama ceramics selling (place)'

As mentioned above, the use of the element *yə-* as a genitive marker is the typical feature of Amharic in genitive constructions. However, in the linguistic landscape, we encountered the element *yə-* in Oromo texts associated with the same grammatical function as in Amharic. For instance, the structure was attested in a trilingual signboard designating a clinic. Interestingly, the Amharic genitive marker *yə-* occurs in both the Oromo as well as the Amharic versions realized in different orthographies, as we see in Figure 4 and parsed in (5).

(5) Use of Amharic *yə-* in Oromo

Sign:

Kiliniika	*Giddugaleessa*	*yə-*	*hiwat*
clinic	medium	GEN-	Hiwat

Conventional Oromo structure :

Kiliniika	*Giddugaleessa*	*Hiwoot-ii*
clinic	medium	Hiwat-GEN

'Hiwat medium-level clinic'

Though the sign designer used an Amharic morphological element, the main word order applied in the construction appears to be Oromo. On the other hand, genitive constructions that do not involve the Amharic element *ya-*, but follow the

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Fig. 4: Amharic genitive marker *yə-* used in an Oromo sign

typical word order of Amharic and still lack the genitive marker of Oromo, are also attested in the linguistic landscape as in (6).

(6) Oromo in Amharic word order

Sign:
[[*Cawaanash* [*Nuug* *Zayit*]$_{\text{Amharic}}$]$_{\text{Amharic}}$
3 2 1

Conventional Oromo structure:
[*Zayita* *Nuug-ii*] *Cawaanash*
Oil Nuug-GEN Chawanesh (name)
1 2 3

'Chawaanesh oil of Nuug' (a kind of leguminous oily seed)

In the structure shown in (6), instead of the Oromo structure, that of Amharic is used in both the embedded as well as the main phrases. As a result, the structure appears to be exactly the reverse of what is conventional in Oromo. Moreover, contrary to conventional word order and morphology in Oromo, the Oromo genitive marking element *–ii* is not used.

Hence in the linguistic landscape of Adama, shop owners and sign designers used noun phrases that can possibly exhibit structures of the two languages,

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framed partly within the structure of Oromo and partly within that of Amharic. Moreover, a morphological marker from Amharic can be used in an Oromo structure. The fact that such structures occur freely in the linguistic landscape but not in the actual spoken language may imply that such grammatical properties of Amharic have been considered standard in the transformation of the spoken languages into literacy, as noted previously. The generation of shop owners did in fact receive their education and literacy training in Amharic. Hence on the surface it appears that the dominance of Amharic in the public sphere still remains not just by its wide occurrence in signs in Amharic, but also through its structure manifested with items from other languages. According to a pervasive ideology among speakers, Amharic still dominates linguistic practices throughout the country.

5 Discussion

In a presentation of the linguistic landscaping of locality, Pennycook (2010: 68) asks, "In public, globalized spaces, is it so clear that signs are 'in' one language or another?" Although Mekele and Adama are indeed not on the same scale as the bustling metropolis of Melbourne in Pennycook's work, the same blurring of language boundaries is present. The question is, how can we explain this? In any explanation we may offer, we are to be reminded of what Purcell-Gates (2007: 23) points out, that "Language and literacy practices and policies are never neutral; they always exist within political bodies and, thus, reflect ideological perspectives that, themselves, reflect relations of power". Individuals make the signs; however, they do not live in a socio-cultural vacuum.

In previous centuries, literacy practices in Ethiopia were left to members of the elite and those belonging to religious communities of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, an important institution in the country. The language of learning was Ge'ez, a now extinct Semitic language, and it was limited to the Bible and other religious works. Subsequently, Amharic assumed the role of Ge'ez especially in non-religious domains. Amharic's dominant role until 1991 enabled the language to be the most developed literary language in the country. Hence Amharic was historically the language of literacy in all non-liturgical arena until the new language policy of ethnic federalism, which promoted the development and literacy of other regional languages. As illustrated in this study, when regional languages such as Tigrinya and Oromo assumed the position in the respective locality that was normally reserved for Amharic, such as the linguistic landscape, people nevertheless are found to employ elements of Amharic structure in writing their own language. Hence there is an apparent common practice to

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employ regional languages in writing containing some Amharic word order and functional elements. Such examples of language contact are not widely documented in the spoken forms of Tigrinya or Oromo, yet they appear in the linguistic landscape.

This literacy practice, moreover, is not only a phenomenon of the linguistic landscape. Signs in the linguistic landscape may be considered "unregulated spaces" (Sebba 2009), as the shop owners independently make their signs. However, contrary to what may be expected in "regulated spaces" where monolingual norms prevail, the same type of language contact occurs. We find this literacy practice in other textual materials, for example, in the production of written materials for education in both Tigray and Oromia. Textbooks in Tigrinya and Oromo used in the elementary schools are reported to have elements of direct translations of the Amharic textbooks, which had been in use for decades. Hence comparable to what has occurred in the linguistic landscape data, Amharic structure is often employed. This is indeed also the case in such a regulated space as the official media broadcasts. Although the language contact in question has not been widely documented in everyday spoken language, an interesting phenomenon concerns the spoken texts used in media broadcasts. For the past 20 years, airtime of a one-hour transmission per day has been allocated to both Tigrinya and Oromo. According to information from media broadcasters who were interviewed, the Amharic news is taken as the main source for the respective transmissions in Oromo and Tigrinya, as the regional programmers translate it into the respective languages of the program. In the process, there is a tendency among the broadcasters to fill in lexical items of the respective languages into the structure of Amharic as opposed to taking the meaning and expressing it in the target language. This results in what is perceived by Ethiopian audiences as a somewhat stilted language that is associated with the register of media broadcasts. Examining the sociolinguistics of multilingualism requires "an approach to language from the vantage point of the social *circulation* of languages across spaces and different semiotic artifacts" (Stroud and Mpendukana 2009), such as the various media involved in these case studies in Ethiopia. As noted above, a pervasive language ideology in the country points to the general dominance of Amharic.

The question remains as to how to interpret these findings. One may be tempted to merely deem these texts in question as "poor" translations, which is often the interpretation given by Ethiopians. Yet the pattern of structural borrowing persists. One clear factor for such structural borrowing is the historical status of Amharic in the country and the intensive contact between the regional languages such as Tigrinya/Oromo, on the one hand, and Amharic on the other. Most of the speakers of regional languages are bilingual in Amharic, a situation that

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allows the languages to be in extensive and long-term contact. Nonetheless the type of language contact exemplified in this article involves literacy practices, both in writing and in the transmission of written texts through media broadcasting. The shop owners are of the generation for which Amharic was still the medium of instruction in schools and hence the key to literacy. Despite the regional acquisition of new language rights regarding written language in the public sphere, given the widespread pattern of language contact and its tacit acceptance, as exemplified in this article, and the fact that Amharic has traditionally been the language of literacy, it appears reasonable to assume that Tigrinya and Oromo speakers somehow continue to perceive Amharic to be the language of literacy although they employ their own language in writing. In any case there is implicit acceptance of this language contact. Leeman and Modan (2009: 332) point out that "landscapes are not simply physical spaces but are instead ideologically charged constructions". And hence the written texts in the landscapes of the two regional capitals in focus in this article can be seen to reflect "ideological perspectives that, themselves, reflect relations of power" (Purcell-Gates 2007: 23). Therefore, in one sense we may claim to witness the covert power of Amharic, despite the reduced role of Amharic in current language policy.

Languages, however, are not agents; agency is a capacity of speakers. If we take the view of language as local practice, as opposed to the analyst's view of language contact between two separate "reified" entities (cf. Makoni and Pennycook 2007), what we are witnessing is how speakers of the regional languages draw on their multilingual resources to create a new arena for language use – an arena that develops a new register for the regional language. Hence in the words of Makoni and Pennycook (2007), we as analysts need to "disinvent" our conceptions of language as preset notions in regards to multilingualism, and rather "acknowledge that languages are inherently hybrid, grammars are emergent and communication fluid" (Canagarajah 2007: 233). Indeed research on code-switching has stressed the monolingual bias in dealing with language contact (see Auer 2007). Thorne and Lantolf (2007) promote a "linguistics of communicative activity", which is "based on a view of language as a historically contingent emergent system". Furthermore, multilingualism should not be seen as merely

> a collection of 'languages' that a speaker controls, but rather as a complex of *specific* semiotic resources, some of which belong to a conventionally defined 'language', while others belong to another 'language'. (Blommaert 2010: 102)

Such a view of linguistic resources is certainly empowering to speakers. Thus these Tigrayan and Oromo speaker-writers can indeed be perceived as active agents in adapting their multilingual competence to new linguistic practices.

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6 Conclusion

Apart from revealing what actors do in the construction of the public space, the linguistic landscape of a certain locality can also reflect aspects of language contact, language dominance and speaker-writer agency. In this article, we explored the linguistic landscape of the capitals of two different regions in Ethiopia to provide an analysis of language contact involving regional languages and Amharic, the national working language. The linguistic landscape manifests examples of a process in literacy practices whereby in communication a change takes place in the structure of a regional language in order to approximate the structure of Amharic, the federal working language that has enjoyed an exclusive visibility and dominance in the entire country for ages. Hence despite the new policy of ethnic federalism that in principle elevates the status of regional languages, we may say that a persistent covert ideology extolling the national language still pervades literacy practices and more formal use of spoken language. Yet by assuming a more communicative approach to the conception of language, we may in fact interpret these findings of language contact as products of the active wielding by the speaker-writers of their multilingual competencies. Examining the linguistic landscape in a multilingual area provides an interesting arena for evaluating agency and power, as demonstrated by the shop owners and sign designers. This study was mainly based on the actual textual productions of the shop owners, which demonstrated similar language contact patterns across regions. Future research can follow up with investigating through in depth interviews the individual language ideologies of the shop owners, sign designers and last but not least passers-by who read the signs. Indeed an interesting follow-up study would be to interview passers-by of various ages on their perceptions of the signs, particularly those signs involving language contact.

Janks (2010: 155) notes that in the field of critical literacy, there has been less attention paid to critical writing "despite the importance of resisting dominant forms and 'writing back' to power". The linguistic landscape investigated in this article has been created by a generation of speakers educated during a period in which the federal working language Amharic was the language of instruction and literacy. A new generation of Ethiopians is coming of age, having been educated and socialised under the new policy of ethnic federalism during the 1990s. To what extent this new generation will maintain these written literacy practices or whether literacy in regional languages will promote the production of texts, or "a form of agency that enables us to choose what meanings to make" (Janks 2010: 156), will remain an object of future research on language contact and power in the linguistic landscape and elsewhere in the Ethiopian context. Indeed these

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speaker-writers may well become active agents of language change not only within more written language use but also in spoken discourse.

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