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## **Linguistic Landscape of the City of Najafabad, Iran: An Investigation of the Religious Signs and their Functionality**

Manouchehri Najafabadi, Sahba

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**Linguistic Landscape of the City of Najafabad, Iran: An  
Investigation of the Religious Signs and their Functionality**

**Sahba Manouchehri Najafabadi**

**MA Thesis Linguistics: Language and Communication**

**Supervisor: Dr. D. Smakman**

**Second Reader: Prof. Dr. G.J. Rutten**

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## **Abstract**

The country of Iran is currently governed by an Islamic regime and religion is a significant notion not only in the ruling system but also in the social and private life of the citizens. The field of linguistic landscape concerns the visibility and salience of languages on all the signs in a given territory or region and the landscape of cities as social constructs are deeply affected by the two forces: the governments from the top and the people from the bottom. This research explores the religious signs in the linguistic landscape of the city of Najafabad in Iran. The aim of this research is to see how religion manifests in the city and how it functions in the landscape of the city. In order to conduct the research, the signs with religious content are collected, and studied in terms of language use, font, theme and agency. The results reveal that the number of top-down signs surpasses the bottom-up signs. In analysis, it is concluded that in the landscape of the city of Najafabad, religion functions as an ideological tool for managing the landscape and promoting the ideology among the citizens.

## **1. Introduction**

Linguistic landscape is a relatively new field in sociolinguistics and is concerned with the use of language in public spaces. As societies are rapidly growing, language embedded in urban landscapes is transforming as well and it is drawing the attention of researchers and scholars. Language in a public space can be embedded in commercial signs, billboards, traffic signs, flyers, etc. Landry and Bourhis's (1997) work on the linguistic landscape was one of the initial research in the field that received widespread reception.

Language choice in a landscape is not random and it is decided by the people for the people in a society. Many elements play a role in the decision-making. Blackwood et al. (2016) believes that language, culture, and identity are interwoven in the linguistic landscape, and in some settings, religion manifests as a social identity and cultural entity in the linguistic landscape of a given space. Despite being few in number, research on the role of religion in the linguistic landscape has already started off. Studies on the linguistic landscape of the cities of, Malang (Ardhian et al., 2021), and Ada Ekiti (Inya, 2019) are examples of such.

Iran is a country with a religious (Islamic) background and is ruled by a religious government today. The public spaces in most of the cities of this country are full of signs loaded with religion as a current theme. The city of Najafabad in the center of the country is a politically and religiously noteworthy place in the state and religion is one of the recurring themes to be perceived when walking in the city. In this research, I will study the religious linguistic signs that exist in the linguistic landscape of this city. First, I will describe them in terms of their language, font, theme, and agency (who has created them) and later, I will try to shed light on its functionality. This investigation is a small step towards understanding how religion, as a concern for the people and the government in the country of Iran, manifests in the public space and what role it plays. This hopes to be grounds for further research on the role of religion in linguistic landscapes in general.

## 1.1. Iran

Iran, officially the Islamic Republic of Iran, formerly Persia, is a country located in Western Asia and is a part of the Middle East. Recognized as the fourth largest country in Asia, Iran has a population of 86 million. The country neighbors Iraq in the west, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey in the northwest, Caspian Sea and Turkmenistan in the north, Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east and the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman in the south. Tehran, the capital, is the biggest and most populous city in the country, followed by Mashhad, Isfahan, Karaj, Shiraz, and Tabriz. The country is administratively divided into subdivisions of Province, each province divided into smaller divisions called Counties, and each county into Cities and Towns.

### *History*

Iran is home to one of the oldest civilizations, reaching its territorial height at the time of the kingdom of Cyrus the Great, the king of the Achaemenid or the Persian Empire in the sixth century BC. The Persian Empire is known for creation of the first charter of human rights in history and their remarkable religion tolerance (Fisher, 1985).

Major changes happened to the country after the Arab/Muslim conquest of the land of Persia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, to an extent that the history of Iran is usually divided into Pre-Islamic and Post-Islamic era. The Zoroastrian religion, as the religion of the royal family and the majority, declined after the conquest, and the Arabic language was designated the primary and official language of the community (Rababah, 2015) while Middle Persian was the official language of the country before that. Despite the pressure to replace the language, Middle Persian endured and then transformed and evolved into New Persian. Middle Persian incorporated a considerable number of Arabic vocabularies, particularly religious words, while most grammatical structures and vocabulary of Middle Persian survived.

Ever since, Islam has been the dominant religion, followed by the majority of the population. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Shi'a Islam became the official religion even though the country had already seen Shi'a rulers. Centuries later, the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925 – 1979) brought about secularism leading to significant changes in the politics and governance of the country. Modern education took over religious education and the women's rights movement ignited and reached its peak in the state during Reza Shah's reign. Women gained the right to vote, to take part in public office, and to unveil the mandatory Islamic Hijab. The latter, together with many other undertakings of the Shah turned into a controversial issue and later gave rise to the Iranian Islamic Revolution in the 1970s.

After the replacement of the Pahlavi Dynasty with Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became the supreme leader, and a new theocratic-republican constitution was formulated (Afkhami, 2009). Right after the regime change in 1980, Iran got into an eight-year-long war with Iraq in the cities of Khorramshahr, Ahvaz, Abadan in the southwestern province of Khuzestan only to end with a ceasefire without a change in the borders (Blight, 2012). During that decade, 349,000 civilians emigrated to the other farther provinces in Iran (Jahanfar, 2017).

## ***Islam: Politics, and Culture***

The official religion of the country is Shi'a Islam at this moment. The Iran 2020 International Religious Freedom Report (2021) states that according to the Iranian government estimations, 99.4 percent of the population of Iran is Muslim. The largest minority religions are Sunni Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and the Baha'i faith. While some of these religions are acknowledged by the government, their communities are marginalized and do not have the right to teach and preach their religion (Tamadonfar et al., 2019). Also, all citizens should abide by the Islamic rules of the state such as Hijab for women or prohibition from eating and drinking in public during the month of Ramadan. Otherwise, there will be ramifications. In September 2022, Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old girl was killed by the *Morality Police* in the state capital due to having improper Hijab, which inspired a wave of national protests across the country.

Islamic culture and ruling are not injected from the top into the society, but they are rooted and are vibrant within smaller units of the society like family, even though they are diminishing. For instance, the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain- the third Shi'a Imam- in the months of Muharram and Safar<sup>1</sup>, is religiously and culturally significant among Iranians to an extent that no celebrations such as weddings take place. In addition, Hijab, even though imposed by the government, is a defining element for chastity of women and functions to safeguard family as a foundation in the society.

## ***Media and Censorship***

In terms of freedom of speech and press, and censorship, Iran is ranked as one of the most strict and repressive in the world. It includes restrictions on media, internet, books, films, religion, language and culture of marginalized ethnicities, etc. Access to satellite television and foreign radio services is banned by the government. Displays of affection, women singing or dancing, or critical speech on politics are instances of content that is censored in the media. Access to various social media platforms and websites such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and recently WhatsApp and Instagram are only possible via VPNs (Virtual Private Networks).

## ***Persian Culture***

Efforts have been made around the world to categorize diverse world cultures based on their characteristics and patterns. Smakman (2017, pp. 40-42) lists three models yielded and presented by investigations, one of which is The Hofstede Model. Designed by a Dutch psychologist, this model distinguishes between six dimensions cultures can be placed on: Power distance, Individuality, Uncertainty avoidance, Long-term orientation, Indulgence, and

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<sup>1</sup> The ninth day of Muharram is known as *Tasu'a*, when in the battle of Karbala, Muslims were preparing for the war that happened the next day on the tenth of Muharram, known as *Ashura*. During that day, Hussain Ibn Ali, the third Shi'a Imam was beheaded and martyred. In the month of Safar, forty days after Ashura, *Arba'een* takes place to commemorate his passing.

Masculinity. In the image below, the cultural differences between Iran and the Netherlands based on Hofstede Model are shown:

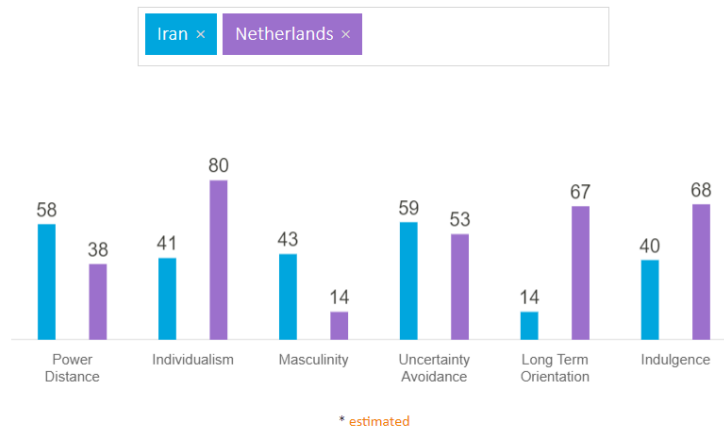


Figure 1: The Hofstede Model presenting cultural differences between Iran and the Netherlands. Retrieved from <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/fi/product/compare-countries/>.

It is hard to reason and make judgements about the culture of a state based on the results of the Hofstede Model. However, a basic unstudied reason for the low percentage for Long-term orientation and indulgence could be the economic situation and inflation caused by sanctions imposed upon Iran that brings about instability and uncertainty about the future. Therefore, uncertainty avoidance rises because one loses trust when in an unstable condition and seeks certainty in order to be able to feel safe. The masculinity dimension refers to stereotypical male and female behavior and being a religious state explains this.

### ***Ethnic Diversity and Immigration***

The population of the country consists of diverse ethnic groups such as Azeri, Kurd, Lur, Turk, Baloch, Arab, and Turkmen (CIA World Factbook (n.d.)). Iran has been host to refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan since 1979. According to the Ministry of Interior of Iran, the total number of Afghans in Iran –legally or illegally residing– in 2015 could be as high as 2.5 million. Interestingly, each ethnic group has their own distinct cultural practices in terms of clothing, food, celebrations, and even language while they all identify themselves as Iranians and celebrate Persian festivities.

### ***Persian Language***

Persian, known as its endonym Farsi, is a Polycentric Indo-European language which is spoken and used officially in the three countries of Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Different varieties that are mutually intelligible are spoken in each region, known as Iranian, Dari, and Tajiki Persian respectively, while their script is not the same. Iranian and Dari Persian use the Persian alphabet, which is a derivation of Arabic script while Tajiki Persian uses the Tajik alphabet that originates from Cyrillic. Modarresi Tehrani (2018) points to Beeman’s (2010) concept of directionality to conclude that the standard Iranian Persian is considered to be the



prestigious variation among all three language communities while Dari and Tajiki variations are seen more as colloquial forms.

Historical documents on the Persian language reveal that the Modern Persian spoken today originates from Old Persian, the oldest known written text of which was discovered in the Behistun<sup>2</sup> inscription. Middle Persian is considered to be a later and complex form of Old Persian (Sims-Williams, 1993). New Persian evolved out of Middle Persian and is divided into three periods of Early New Persian, Classical Persian and Modern Persian. After the Islamic conquest of the state in the seventh century, there was extensive contact with the Arabic language in the region during formation of Early Modern Persian in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century (Paul, 2000), and hence, Arabic syntax and lexicon found their way into the Persian language. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Classical Persian emerged and became associated with the standardized language of medieval Persia used in literature and poetry (*Persian Language*, n.d.). Contemporary or Modern Persian came into existence very recently in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the Qajar Dynasty in Tehran when numerous French, English, and Russian words found their way into the language (Sadeghi, 2001).

Calligraphy is one the most esteemed and admired arts in Iranian history. Modern Iranian calligraphies, on Negahban's (1989) account, are Tholth, Naskh, Nasta'liq, and Shekasteh-Nasta'liq. Of all the styles, Nasta'liq is known as the most prominent in the Persian script. This calligraphy can be found in Persian classical literature and poetry, in old and sometimes new architectural designs, and nowadays, in the Persian language schoolbooks. Naskh is one of the first scripts of Islamic calligraphy and is commonly known as one of the highest art forms in the Muslim world and it is the language of sacred texts. Historically, it has been used for transcribing the Quran and in architectural designs.

### ***Language Diversity***

There are different ethnolinguistic groups speaking their own native languages within the Iranian territory. According to the Atlas of Iranian Languages (Anonby, n.d.), the Iranian languages spoken in the territory can be divided into smaller families of Indic, Iranian and Armenian which are Indo-European, and Turkic, Semitic and Kartvelian families that are non-Indo-European. Luri, Bakhtiari, Kurdish, Talishi, Baluchi and Mazandarani or Gilaki are examples of prominent Iranian languages spoken across the country (Modarresi Tehrani, 2018). Languages such as Mandaic, Tati, Parachi, Wakhi, Munji, Ormuri, Yaghnobi, and Parya, are classified as definitely, severely, or critically endangered languages which are presumed to originate from oral cultures (Grenoble and Whaley, 1998). The linguistic landscape of the country consists of Persian, Azeri (also referred to as Azerbayejani Turkish), Kurdish, Mazandarani or Gilaki, and Armenian (spoken by the Armenian Christian community) (Mahootian, 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> The Behistun Inscription is established by Darius the Great as a large rock relief on a cliff at Mount Behistun in the Kermanshah Province of Iran around 522–486 BC.

### ***Iranian Persian Dialects, Policies, and Media***

Iranian Persian alone as a macro-language has an extensive range of regional and local varieties spoken in different geographical areas (Beeman, 2010). Isfahani, Mashhadi, Tehrani, Yazdi, Shirazi are instances of regional (provincial) dialects, that are named after the region the dialect comes from. The regional Persian dialects are loosely referred to as *accents* among Persian speakers. Standardized spoken Persian is known to be closest to Tehrani Persian and this dialect is considered the most prestigious dialect of Persian, since it is the closest to the language of mass media and literature and is spoken in the capital which is urban, rich and overpopulated. Labov (1972, p. 299) notes that regional dialects are more likely to be perceived as less prestigious because they are used by fewer numbers of speakers who have low income and low prestige jobs.

One of the current issues with the Persian language is that some linguists seek the purification of foreign language elements coming from Arabic and European languages such as English or French. Kia (1998) recounts that Persian nationalists divided the realm of ideas into two categories of material and spiritual. The material dimension was affected by Europe and could be removed more easily. However, since Arabic is associated with religion, it has deeper roots in the Persian language and culture. The way to purify the Persian language of Islamic/Arabic elements is by replacing the existing with Iranian pre-Islamic elements, loaded with nationalism and derived from a rich literary heritage. Kia (1998) however, believes that Iran is a “mosaic of diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups possessed in their own distinctive values and tradition”.

### ***Foreign Languages in the Educational System***

Teaching of standard Persian (writing, and if Persian is not a student’s first language, speaking) officially starts from the first grade of elementary school. Reading Arabic Texts of the Quran is also included in the curriculum from the very first grade. The Ministry of Education in Iran requires the learning of English and Arabic as foreign languages from middle school onwards until a secondary or high school diploma is obtained (Jamshidifard, 2011, P. 74). English as a foreign language found its way into the education system of Iran in the 19th century and has been the primary foreign language ever since (Hayati et al., 2010, p. 29). After the Islamic revolution of Iran in the 1970s, Arabic received a higher status from the Ministry of Education due to its association with Islam and Islamic texts like the Quran. English is still part of the school curriculum as well, because of its status as the global language (Hayati et al., P. 34). Nevertheless, there are deficiencies in the education of students and in equipping them with the communicative skills and cultural aspects of the languages required in the public sector.

## 1.2. The City of Najafabad

Najafabad is a 400 year old city located in west of Isfahan province in the central plateau of Iran with a population of 319,500 people (Moarrefi Shahrestan-e Najafabad [Introduction to Najafabad County], n.d.). The city of Najafabad should not be mistaken with the Najafabad County. The city of Najafabad is the center of the county while it –the county- is divided into smaller cities and districts including Najafabad (city), Goldasht (city), Kahriz Sang (city), Jowzdan (District), and Safayyeh (District).



*Map 1: The location of the city of Najafabad on the globe, in Iran and in the province of Isfahan.*

Najafabad is a religiously conservative and traditional city, and the name comes from the city of Najaf in Baqdad, Iraq<sup>3</sup>. The book “Dibacheh-ye Diar-e Noon” [A Prologue to the Land of Najafabad] written by Ali Yazdani in 1993, is a comprehensive source of information on different aspects of the city. In the book, he notes that followers of the religions of Islam, Zoroastrianism, the Baha’i faith, Christianity and Judaism live in the city. The majority of the population are Muslim and other religions are practiced privately only.

### ***Population***

In Dibacheh-ye Diar-e Noon it is claimed that only one percent of the population were people from outside of the city, and the other 99 percent are locals to the area. More than 85 percent of the people coming from out of town were from the cities of Isfahan and Yazd, a neighboring province located in the southeast. The people from Khuzestan, Markazi and Fars provinces have the highest numbers of people moving into the city respectively after Isfahan and Yazd. Most of those from Khuzestan were actually refugees from the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. It is surprising that Najafabad had 2500 losses, the highest number of any city, in the war in terms of soldiers –volunteer or non-volunteer- who were sent to the frontline (Amari Jaleb az Shohada-ye Najafabad [An Interesting Statistic in Regard to Martyrs from Najafabad], 2017). The only foreigners that live in the city of Najafabad are refugees from Afghanistan that are marginalized in the society.

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<sup>3</sup> The story of creation of the city is related to religion as well. When Isfahan was the capital of the country during the reign of the Safavid kings, Shah Abbas devoted some money to the Shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf, Baghdad and he was willing to send the money there with a caravan. When Sheikh Baha’i, one of the influential figures in the Safavid court, claimed that he dreamt about Imam Ali informing him that it would be more desirable to invest the wealth in building a city near Isfahan and call it Najafabad. The Shah agreed and Sheikh Baha’i built the city there.

### ***Political Significance***

Najafabad had a significant role in the formation and acceleration of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Hussein-Ali Montazeri as a Grand Marja (someone who can be a role model in religion) of Shia Islam (Slackman, 2009), originally from Najafabad, was one of the leaders of the revolution together with the revolution's Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini and was designated as his successor before their falling out in 1989.

### ***Language***

Najafabad has its own dialect of Persian known as the Najafabadi dialect, or *accent*. It is very common for native inhabitants to speak the dialect at home and in public, even though due to the increasing rate of migration and travel, the younger generation is less likely to (only) speak their local dialect (Farnia, 2014). She also indicates that in her research, the older participants from the city were more likely to assume their regional dialect as standard and hence, less willing to switch to any other dialect. Also, women appeared more accommodating to the standard Persian dialect than men of the same language community. The languages of Dari Persian, Georgian, Luri and Turkish are also spoken by other ethnic groups in the city but only in private and not in public situations.

## **1.3. Literature Review**

Sociolinguistics as a field of study is focused on language in social contexts and tries to lay bare correlations amongst speakers, settings, and language uses (Smakman, 2018, pp. 3-10). Sociolinguists who do fieldwork investigations move from place to place and use their equipment to document the language used in a specific setting. The language studied by sociolinguists is not limited to spoken language among people and written language in books but also the language used in public spaces, which is referred to as Linguistic Landscape study. In order to collect data and study the language in a specific landscape, a sociolinguist uses a digital camera, as well as their other equipment. This is a field of cooperation among sociolinguists, applied linguists, sociologists, psychologists, cultural geographers and several other disciplines (Shohamy et al., 2010).

Linguistic landscape as a new area of study has developed in recent years as a field of interest. One of the early research on linguistic landscape was published by Landry and Bourhis in 1997. In their account, linguistic landscape is defined as “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration”. Some other papers, have broader definitions of linguistic landscape, encompassing other items such as sounds, the language heard on the media (Dailey et al. 2005), and the language spoken and heard by the human beings in the public (Shohamy & Waksman, 2009).

Many studies such as Landry & Bourhis (1997) in referral to Leclerc’s research (1989), Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), and Cenoz & Gorter (2006) make a distinction with different

terminology, between public signs, and private signs. Public signs, also known as top-down signs, are issued by public authorities such as governments, municipalities, or public agencies. The private signs, or bottom-up, on the other hand, are issued by private initiative such as individuals, associations or firms that act more or less autonomously in the limits of authorized regulations. The top-down signs have the capacity to control and regulate the linguistic landscape through their language policy and management, while the private signs can be indicative of freedom of speech in the public sector (Leclerc 1989, referred to by Landry & Bourhis 1997).

The initiators, creators or owners of the signs in linguistic landscape studies are referred to as *agents* in Spolsky (2009) and Huebner (2009), and in some other literature such as Ben-Rafael (2009) and Edelman (2010), they are referred to as *actors*. Huebner (2009) divides the participants in a landscape into two groups of agents and audience. In this research, I will be using Huebner's (2009) term and definition for referral. In his work, an agent is a participant in the linguistic landscape of a setting who has agency, whether as an individual or at an institutional level.

Public space in linguistic landscape studies includes every open space in a community or society that is accessible to the public and is exposed to the public eye including streets, town squares, parks, shops, billboards, buildings, etc. (Miles, 2007). Ben Rafael et al. (2006) believe that public spaces used for linguistic landscape research consist of areas designated as 'center' or 'downtown' where one can find for instance, restaurants, fashion boutiques, theaters, offices, municipal buildings, and department stores. On the other hand, major government bodies, warehouses and factories are not seen, and hence, not included. In contrary to the natural landscapes, linguistic landscapes are entirely human-made and socially constructed and public interaction usually takes place in these limited spaces.

A sign and what it constitutes in linguistic landscape studies has different definitions. In Backhaus's account (2006, p. 55), a sign is "considered to be any piece of written text within a spatially definable frame". El-Yasin and Mahadin (1996: 409) consider all the linguistic material written to draw attention to a subject such as a shop, whether in one frame or on different sides of the shop, as one sign. Cenoz & Gorter (2006, p. 71) decide that each establishment counts as one single sign and unit of analysis together with for instance, all the irrelevant advertisements on their shop window.

The common interest of this discipline is understanding a linguistic landscape as a scene where the public space is symbolically constructed (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). Ben-Rafael (2009) attempts to explain diversity in the linguistic landscape in four principles of structuration: presentation of self, good reasons, power relations, and collective identity. He explains the principle of presentation of self as strategies that the actors (later in the research I will refer to them as Agents) of the signs use to express their identities and reach their goals by the linguistic choices they make in a public space. On the other hand, in order to attract the public, they converge their choices and adapt them and their values to the needs and desires of the audience, which explains the good reasons principle. The power relations principle points to dominance of one or more actor over others and the extent to which the creators of the signs are capable of imposing their values and patterns of behavior on the others. At last, the principle of collective

identity, like the principle of presentation of self, pertains to the identity of the actors, while it signals a particular ethnic or religious identity within a group or a community. To better distinguish between the two principles of presentation of self and collective identity, Ben-Rafael (2009) states that through the principle of presentation of self, the actors try to show their *uniqueness* while through collective identity, showing *likeness* is the aim of the actors. Also, he emphasizes that the more tolerant a society is for the sociocultural differences and institutionalization, the more free the actors are in expressing their identities and making linguistic choices.

Blommaert (2012) believes that there is a great potential in the field of linguistic landscape, which is both descriptive and analytical. In descriptive terms, linguistic landscape can expand the range of sociolinguistic descriptions from speakers to physical spaces where these speakers dwell, pick up and leave, so to speak, linguistic deposits, signposts and roadmaps. The analytical potential enables diagnosing social, cultural and political structures inscribed in a linguistic landscape. These structures in physical spaces are loaded with codes, norms and traditions, and enable various social behaviors. Power dynamics are also a major topic of discussion in analytical research, and the analytical potential of the linguistic landscape allows researchers to identify underlying patterns within these areas.

### ***Linguistic Landscape Theories***

The boundaries of this field are fuzzy and they extend in many directions, and therefore, it allows spaces for a variety of theoretical approaches. Spolsky (2009) believes that semiotics is the most promising theoretical framework in linguistic landscape studies. Jaworski and Thurlow in *Introducing Semiotic Landscapes* (2010) refuse to use the term linguistic landscape and propose semiotic landscape as a substitute term in order to “emphasize the way written discourse interacts with other discursive modalities, including visual images, non-verbal communication, architecture and the built environment”.

One of the other important approaches in the field of linguistic landscape is the ethnographic linguistic landscape, which was developed by Blommaert and Maly (2014, 2019) and is primarily qualitative and historical. This approach was designed to zoom in on the sociolinguistic super-diversity that exists in societies through paying attention to linguistic landscapes. In fact, linguistic landscapes are seen as objects holding traces of ethnographic diversity, as well as social changes and actions (Blommaert and Maly, 2019).

Some approaches such as the economic approach or the holistic approach are less common. Some research is focused on multilingualism and languages used, and some are focused on perception of the public from the signs and the landscape rather than the signs and the landscape alone (See Landry and Bourhis, 1997).

Language management and policy is a significant topic of discussion in linguistic landscape studies. It focuses on power relations and hierarchy, in most cases on the top-down relationships. Fancis M. Hult (2014) refers to previous research to state that linguistic landscapes are the product of intersecting factors that mediate language choices such as beliefs and

ideologies about languages, language policies, and communicative needs. Therefore, analyzing the ways in which language is used visually in public space, allows reading a linguistic landscape as an expression of possible sociopolitical tensions among them. Shohamy notes, “the presence (or absence) of specific language items, displayed in specific languages, in a specific manner, sends direct and indirect messages with regard to the centrality versus the marginality of certain languages in society” (2006, p. 110).

In some cases, there is an explicit relationship between language policy and linguistic landscape. An example is the clear signing and advertising policy in Kuala Lumpur (Manan et al., 2015, p. 35) which aims for consistency in linguistic landscape. However, in some circumstances, the relationship between the two is indirect. Based on Hult’s (2018) account, researchers may analyze and interpret the language used in the linguistic landscapes in relation to sociopolitical context, which often includes general language policy that may not target signage directly but provides insight into the ideological climate in which a linguistic landscape exists. Examples of research focused on this are Kasanga (2012) which examines the distributional pattern of signs in the linguistic landscape of a commercial district in Cambodia, Hult (2014) focusing on the ideological dominance of English language in the United States, and Isleem (2015) studying the dominance of the Hebrew language and deconstruction of Druze community in Israel. This paper will focus on and study the linguistic landscape of the city of Najafabad for the purpose of finding insights into ideological climates of the area considering its distinct sociopolitical context.

### *Linguistic Landscape Studies*

Previous linguistic landscape research in Iran is limited to only a small number of cities. Mirvahedi (2016) draws upon language policy and planning theories to explore bilingualism in the city of Tabriz in the north-west of Iran, as Azerbaijani, the native language of the area is neglected over the use of Persian as the official language in the state. Through the findings, he concludes that the linguistic landscape does not always represent the linguistic repertoire of the people living in a geographical space, but the image the state government aims to display.

Some research has been done on the linguistic landscape of the city of Tehran, the capital of the state. Mohebbi and Firuzkahi (2021) did a typological investigation of top-down and bottom-up errors in the use of English in the bilingual and multilingual linguistic landscape of Tehran. The results of this research suggest that the top-down errors exceed the bottom-up errors in number and in conclusion, he draws on the influence of language policy and foreign language education on this phenomenon. Sahranavard and Lee (2020) examines the use of English in the landscape of Tehran in order to understand the role of English as a linguistic and cultural resource in Iranian cultural practices. Their research concludes that through the phenomenon of Persianization, English has become relocalized in accordance with the local communicative needs of the contemporary Iranians in Tehran. Rezaei and Tadayyon (2018) published their account on language and identity as it is represented in the linguistic landscape of Julfa district in the city of Isfahan. Julfa is home to and dominated by the members of the Armenian diaspora

and findings of the report reveal that the signs in the neighborhood represent their national as well as religious identities.

Linguistic landscape research on the religious signs has initiated in different countries as well. In Asia, Esteron (2021) has written about English in a major Catholic Church in the Philippines. Also, in Indonesia, Ardhian et al. (2021) explores religious performance in the worship signs that exist in worship places in the city of Malang. In Africa, Inya (2019) has done research on the religious signboards in Ado Ekiti state in Nigeria to examine the relationship between the signboards and the implications for identity, globalization and culture.

### ***Research Questions***

Iran is ruled by a religious theocratic government and the linguistic landscape of it is not free from its influence. This research attempts to study and describe the religious signs in the linguistic landscape of the city of Najafabad, and through that, deduce the role and function of the religion of Islam as an ideological climate in the landscape of the city. Therefore, two questions are posed here:

1. How does religion manifest in the linguistic landscape of the city of Najafabad?
2. What is the role and functionality of religion in the linguistic landscape of the city of Najafabad?

To initiate and answer the questions, some features of the linguistic signs have been chosen to be studied and the following preparatory questions have been posed to be answered by this research (the first three questions prepare for the first research questions and the last question prepares for the second research question):

- What languages are used in the religious signs?
- What visual aspect(s) of the languages used in the religious signs are bold and how do they appear in the signs?
- What types of content are included in the religious signs?
- Who has created the religious signs?

The city of Najafabad, due to its extreme conservativeness and political significance is a good subject for investigating religion in its landscape. In addition, coming from this area, I am familiar with the setting, be it the visual or sociological aspects of it.

## **2. Methodology**

In this research, I used photographic material of public signage in the city center of Najafabad, taken by a local photographer. Before focusing on the religious signs, I took all signs in the landscape of the city into consideration in order to find a general overview of the signs in the city, and to find out what percentage of the signs are religious in the landscape of the city of Najafabad.



In the following, I will elaborate on the research process in six steps, from choosing the research site to analysis of the data and finding the results.

### ***Step 1: Choosing the Research Site***

I decided to analyze the landscape in the city center where most shops, official buildings and activities exist and take place. The setting is restricted to roadways, and locations such as parks, cemeteries, schools, etc. are not included. Reason being that in each location, certain participants perform certain activities, and the linguistic landscape differs in each setting accordingly as well. Roadways are not merely for a specific group of people and seem to be neutral, considering that there is a shared culture all over the city even though the city has people of diverse ethnicities and cultures.

I picked six main roadways in the city, four of which are parallel and stretch from north to south and four others, stretch from east to west. These streets meet at main junctions or squares in the city and run through the center where most shops and important buildings are; nevertheless, the streets reach out to the residential neighborhoods and outskirts as well.

### ***Step 2: Arrangements for Taking the Photos***

This research has been conducted from a distance. I asked a professional photographer who lives in Najafabad and is familiar with the city to take images for this research. He took 205 images with his professional digital camera. The photos have a high resolution and allow the researcher to zoom in and take notes of the farthest signs in the frames.

### ***Step 3: Collecting Data and Transferring Files***

The 205 images were taken from the roadways and squares mentioned earlier, but not limited to those. The photographer reported he drove to different parts of the city because parts of the main avenues I picked for the research are one-way streets and one must pass through some less significant streets or areas in order to get to the selected main streets. Therefore, he took the chance to record signs of those less significant areas as well. In my opinion, even though some of these areas are not part of the center, no drastic change is noticeable except that the number of signs declines.

Transferring photos online from Iran to the Netherlands was an effort. Since most international platforms were shut down, we used Eitaa, an Iranian national platform that does not require using a VPN. Even though this platform was established and promoted by the government, it was not well known and widely used, but it accelerated transferring the files.

### ***Step 4: Sampling***

After downloading the images, I started listing the signs in the landscape visible in the images in an Excel Sheet. At this stage, I included both linguistic and nonlinguistic signs. The linguistic signs are legible signs with written text in any language on them. These signs include billboards, shop signs, some of the traffic signs, etc. The nonlinguistic signs include images,

statues, paintings (most commonly on walls), traffic signs, trashcans, lights, etc. in the landscape. The signs in the latter category in most cases are semiotic, i.e. they serve as an index of a message, concept, etc. I decided to include trashcans and some decorative lights in the landscape in the research but not the lampposts and the curbs as recurring items. One reason is that the trashcans and the decorative lights were not repetitive elements in the city and they were not high in number while the curbs and the lampposts were countless and all over the city. These decorative lights were noticeable in some streets only and they seemed to be set up for specific purposes, and the trashcans were of three different sizes and colors around the city.

In the course of listing the signs, I made the rough estimation that there are around 2000 signs in total in the 205 images, and therefore, I resumed listing until I reached 1000 signs and used them as the initial sample for this research.

### ***Step 5: Initial Labeling***

The stage after listing the signs was *labeling*. At this stage, different features of the signs as variables including their content and theme, relevant agent and their language were added to the list as labels, and then counted. In the following section, each variable and specific labels will be defined and the process of labeling will be described in more detail.

*Table 1: An overview of the number of signs for each category and with each label. (One sign may fall into more than one category and have more than one label.)*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Labels (variants)</b>		<b>Number</b>	
Theme	Religious		314	
	Political		113	
	Traffic Signs		279	
	Commercial		371	
Language	Linguistic	745	Persian	476
			English	5
			Arabic	93
			Persian/English	129
			Persian/Arabic	36
			English/Arabic	1
	Persian/English/Arabic	5		
Non-linguistic		Non-linguistic	255	
Agency	Governmental		568	
	Nongovernmental		342	
	Not known		90	

### ***Theme***

The labels in this category address the theme of the content of the messages of the linguistic and non-linguistic signs and their functionality in the landscape of the city. Transcribing signs helped with recognizing *religious, commercial, traffic* and *political* as recurring themes in the signs.

Any sign that contains religious content or religious terms, or any sign designed to address a religious concept is labeled as Religious. Religious signs can be diverse and include nearby town and street names named after religious figures or concepts as well. Signs labeled as political are the ones with a political message or signs that indirectly address a political concept, event, figure, etc. These signs are not necessarily set up by the government but in most cases announce or promote a governmental policy. Traffic signs are designed and set up by the traffic police and give drivers directions on how to behave on the road. They range from warning signs like STOP to information signs that guide one to a specific location. Commercial signs are business-related and promote the purchase or the use of a product or service, or identify a business at a location, either online or offline. They can be in diverse sizes, shapes, and styles, and are more likely to be found in the center of the city, even though they are not limited to the centers.

### ***Language***

The languages visible in the landscape of Najafabad are Persian, English, and Arabic. The signs are divided into categories of Linguistic, which contain at least one written language, and Nonlinguistic, in which no language is observable. Persian signs are linguistic signs with a text written in the Persian alphabet that contain contemporary Persian lexicon in it. The Persian language has many words borrowed from other languages such as English, Arabic, and French, however, in this research, as long as the borrowed words are written in the Persian alphabet and the words are commonly used in Persian, they count as Persian. Signs labeled English need to have been written in the Latin alphabet, and Arabic signs are words, expressions, or sentences that are purely Arabic. Signs with more than one language are labeled separately as for instance, Persian/English or Arabic/Persian.

### ***Agency***

As mentioned before, I will be using the term ‘Agent’ used by Huebner (2009) in this research to refer to the participants in the linguistic landscape of a setting who create, set up, or own the signs whether they are individuals or institutions. To address the relevant agent, I divided them into two categories of *governmental* and *non-governmental*. Governmental signs are the signs designed and set up by any governmental institution such as the municipality, the police, the traffic police, etc. At the bottom of some governmental signs, one can spot the name of the agent, e.g., the local municipality of the region. In cases where the agent was ambiguous even after searching, I labeled the signs as *Not Known*.

### ***Step 6: Focus on the Religious Signs***

The focus of this research is on the highlighted category in the table 1, the religious signs. As indicated in the Table, there are 314 signs (31 percent) that are religiously loaded. This is about one-third of all the signs and this number includes linguistic and nonlinguistic signs. In order to pursue a linguistic investigation of the signs, I omitted the nonlinguistic signs such as paintings and images.

Therefore, 303 religious linguistic signs, as the main data, will be studied in terms of language, font (style of text), theme, and their ascribed agency. Categorization with religious signs in terms of language and agency was carried out similar to the procedure in step 5. In the following, the two other categories of Font and Theme will be described in further detail.

#### ***Font (Style of Text)***

The religious signs in the landscape are in diverse styles of text, here referred to as Fonts. Detecting all fonts requires a very precise study of the shape of each letter in the signs and therefore, it is very time consuming and difficult. On the other hand, there are various calligraphy styles for the Persian and Arabic scripts meaning that only an expert in the field can differentiate between them. However, more generalized font categories can be named in order to classify the signs in terms of their font, or style of text, easier.

I distinguish between three categories of Persian Calligraphy, Islamic Calligraphy, and Digital Printing style for this research. The Persian calligraphy differs from the Islamic (Arabic) in its proportion of straight and curved letters and its eminence in Persian poetry writings. In the Islamic calligraphy, the letters and words are in most cases intertwined and less legible than the Persian and they are used for decorative purposes, in most cases for Islamic scripts. Nasta'liq is one of the most famous Persian calligraphy styles and Naskh is one of the most famous among Islamic styles. I used these two styles as a point of departure and I will label fonts based on their similarity to these two calligraphy styles.

Digital print styles are considered the most neutral and the closest to a standard form of writing. These fonts are the most legible and they are used for books, documents, etc. in most cases. The three lines below illustrate three examples of the Persian calligraphy style, the Islamic calligraphy style, and the Digital print style respectively.

تفاوت سه خط نستعلیق، نسخ، و دیجیتالی را مشاهده میکنید.  
تفاوت سه خط نستعلیق، نسخ و دیجیتالی را مشاهده میکنید.  
تفاوت سه خط نستعلیق، نسخ، و دیجیتالی را مشاهده میکنید.

*Illustration 1: Examples of the three fonts in the landscape of the city of Najafabad.*

## ***Theme***

Religious signs are divided into five thematic categories based on the content of their linguistic message. These categories allow seeing different types and aspects of religious content presented in the signs in the landscape of the city of Najafabad. Five themes of Ethics and Principles, Political matters, Traditions, Names and Expressions will be further explained here.

- Ethics and Principles

Religious signs that belong to the category of Ethics and Principles are signs the content of which addresses morals and rules concerning the religion of Islam. *Ahkam*, which are specific Quranic rules for the followers to abide by can be mandatory, recommended, permissible, reprehensible, or forbidden in Shi'a Islam and if they are addressed in the signs in the landscape, they are included in this category.

- Political Matters

Religious signs that address a political matter, e.g. a policy, an issue, event, figure, etc. directly or indirectly are labeled as political sign. Signs that are set up by a governmental institution which promote a value merely as a virtue and direct people to take certain actions that benefit the government indirectly are labeled as governmental as well.

- Traditions, Names, Expressions

The religious signs that address the traditions practiced in the country, which stem from religious beliefs, are labeled as Traditional. The signs with names of streets and places can be seen in different places in different shapes. If the names of these places are religious, they fall into this category. Signs labeled as Expressions are Islamic expressions, such as invocations like *Allahu Akbar* or *Ya Hussain*. They can be found on the walls, set up signs, and even on vehicles.

## **3. Results**

In a quantitative analysis in this section, first I will present a general overview of the number of signs for each category and with each label in Table 2. Then I will elucidate on each category and present images related to each category to better illustrate and showcase the state of religion in the landscape of the city of Najafabad.

Table 2: The categorization of the religious signs in the landscape of the city of Najafabad in terms of language, font, agency, and theme.

Categories (Variables)	Labels (variants)	Number
Language	(Purely) Persian	102
	(Purely) Arabic	93
	(Purely) English	0
	Persian/English	42
	Persian/Arabic	36
	English/Arabic	1
	Persian/English/Arabic	5
Font (Style of Text)	Persian Calligraphy Style	98
	Islamic Calligraphy Style	55
	Digital Print Style	178
	Logos	12
	English	1
Agency	Governmental	203
	Nongovernmental	64
	Not known	36
Theme (Content)	Ethics and Principles	58
	Political Matters	123
	Traditions	46
	Names	90
	Expressions	112

### **Language**

The Persian language is seen in 185 (61 percent) of the religious linguistic signs in the landscape of the city. Arabic is the second highly used language in the landscape of the city of Najafabad, encompassing 135 (44.5 percent) of the religious signs, and 48 (16 percent) of the religious signs have English language in them. Of all the religious signs, about 102 (33 percent) of the signs are purely Persian, and 92 (30 percent) are purely Arabic. Considering Persian is the only official language in Iran, it is surprising that it is not used in nearly 40 percent of the signs. The ratio of the Arabic signs in the landscape can be observed as high considering the fact that Arabic is not a spoken language in the region. However, Arabic is the language associated with Islam, and since the signs studied are religious, the percentage does not seem to be inordinate. There are no religious signs that are purely English but English can be found together with Persian and Arabic in the religious signs. The commercial signs in Image 1 are examples of purely Persian signs with religious content. These signs are diverse in type, ranging from signs related to religious offices and buildings to religious quotes on the walls across the city.



Image 1

The purely Arabic signs in the city involve Islamic expressions such as *La Ilaha Illallah* or *Ya Hussain*, or religious quotations or verses from the Quran written above building entrances, on mosques tiles, or different flags hanging from the religious-governmental buildings. The national flag of the country has Islamic expressions on it as well. Image 2 indicates three examples of Islamic expressions in one scene from the landscape of the city of Najafabad.

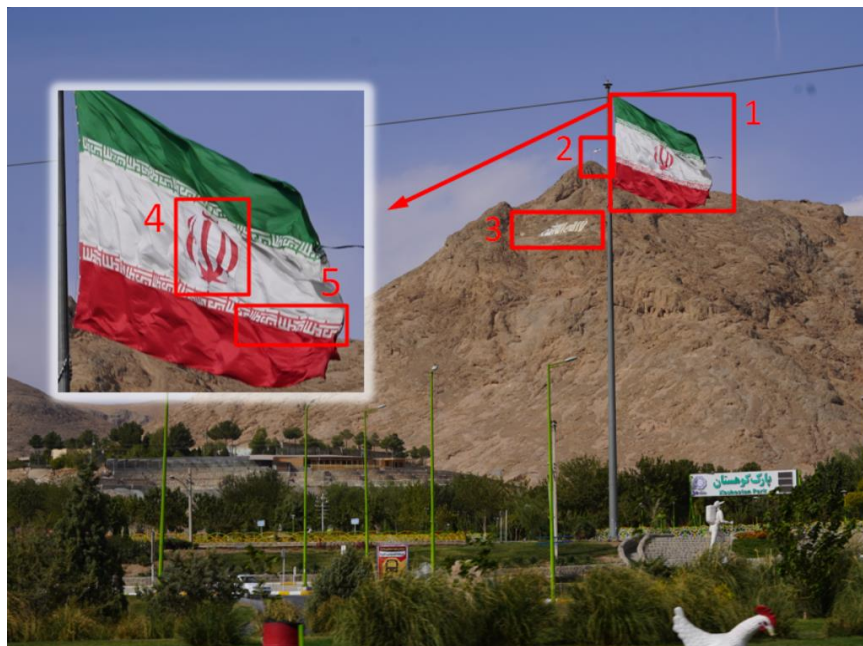


Image 2



Frames 1 and 2 in Image 2 indicate two national flags, one of which is enlarged on the left side of the image to better show the designed logograms. The one in the center of the flag stands for the Arabic word *Allah* (الله), meaning ‘The God’, and the lines on the white stripe of the flag state the Islamic expression *Allah-u Akbar* (الله اكبر) which means ‘The God is Greater’. Frame 3 points out the other religious expression of *La Ilaha Illallah* (لااله الا الله), meaning ‘There is no God but Allah’. This sign has been inscribed on this mountain for decades, and hence, it is regarded as the La Ilaha Illallah Mountain.

As mentioned earlier, there are no purely English religious signs in the landscape of the city, and English is always followed by either Persian or Arabic in religious signs. Nearly all of the Persian / English signs in the landscape are related to signs designed for streets names. In Image 3, two of the signs on the indicated direction board address a boulevard and a freeway respectively named after well-known religious-political figures martyred in war: *Ayatullah Taleghani* (آیت الله طالقانی) and *Haj Ahmad Kazemi* (حاج احمد کاظمی).



Image 3

There is only one sign labeled as English / Arabic among the religious signs and that is presented in Image 4. As indicated, the Islamic expression (invocation) *Ya Abolfazl* (يا ابو الفضل) is painted in the Latin alphabet in the rear windshield of a car. The expression is an invocation of Abolfazl, who was martyred together with Imam Hussain (Muhammad’s grandson) in the battle of Karbala. It is interesting to know that painting or sticking stickers of similar religious expressions on the back of the vehicles is very customary in the state.





Image 4

Persian / Arabic signs occur in various types though. A number of them are Islamic quotes in Arabic with their translation at the bottom in the Persian language. Another type involves the death announcements on the walls or announcement boards stating one's passing using religious quotes in the Arabic language and then giving details about their funeral and the ceremony in Persian. A visual example of this is presented in Image 5. Persian signs with a mention of Basmala<sup>4</sup> in Arabic in them are regular and fall under this category as well.

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<sup>4</sup> The Basmala, or Tasmiiyah, is the titular name for *Bi-smi llāhi r-Raḥmāni r-Raḥīm* (بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ), an Islamic phrase which means "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful". It is commonly used by Muslims before most daily actions.



Image 5

There are five religious signs in the photos taken from the city that have the three languages of Persian, Arabic and English in one frame. These signs are on yellow metal boards on the walls of the central mosque with verses of the Quran in the Arabic language and then translated into Persian and English underneath. The signs are indicated in Image 6. In the enlarged image, text 1 is in the Arabic language and is an actual verse from the Quran. Text 2 is the Persian translation of the verse and text 3 is the English translation of the same.



Image 6

### *Font (Styles of text)*

During the labeling process, I divided the religious signs in terms of font into five categories instead of the three mentioned before in the methodology section. Of all signs, 178 (59 percent) are in Digital print style, which is the most recurrent style of the five. The Persian calligraphy style is the second most recurrent font style in the landscape, visible in 98 (32 percent) of the religious signs, followed by the Islamic calligraphy style that is used in 55 (18 percent) of the religious signs in the landscape of the city. The Logogram style signs are only 12 (4 percent) in number and most of them are related to the Iranian flag, which is displayed in Image 2. There is one sign written in the Latin alphabet that is counted and labeled separately since it does not fit into the other font categories.

All signs in the Islamic calligraphy style category are in Arabic and are religious writings from the Quran, or Islamic expressions. However, the signs written in the Persian calligraphy style are in both Persian and Arabic language and are diverse in terms of content. Examples of signs of this category range from large billboards set up by the government calling for the daily obligatory prayers (Namaz), to shops and brands named after religious figures.

There is no solid pattern in regards to the decided styles of text and the content of the signs, especially in the Persian calligraphy and the digital print styles. Signs on the mosques are the only ones that are formularized when it comes to style of text. The religious writings on the tiles are inscribed only in the Islamic or Persian calligraphy styles and the designs have aesthetic purposes.

Other urban signs however, show no sign of consistency in font. It appears that good composition of the words and a harmony between them within the frames of the signs are not priorities and not planned. As one can see in Image 7, relatively large size texts are used in the frames leaving no free space in the frame. It is probably assumed that having more religious expressions in a sign can index one into a category of righteousness and virtuousness as a person who has connections to the sign and its corresponding place. Also, there are typos and misspellings, and there is poor spacing between the words and letters, even in the signs set up by the government.

Image 7 shows examples of the three most recurring fonts in one scene. The building in the image is dedicated to a Hussainiya, buildings similar to mosques where religious commemorations and celebrations take place. The bold text in yellow in sign 1 and the text in white on sign 2 are examples of the Persian calligraphy style. The most prominent feature of this style is that the letters are soft and curvy and there are no sharp dents. Also, each word starts from the top right and ends at the bottom left. Two small religious expressions on top of sign 1 and the religious invocation in sign 3 are written in the Islamic calligraphy style. The words are entangled, as indicated in the enlarged image, and it usually requires effort to distinguish words and letters, depending on their complexity. The yellow text in sign 2 is written in the Digital print style. The sign says 'Welcome' and its font is closest to the Persian standard style that one can find in books and media.



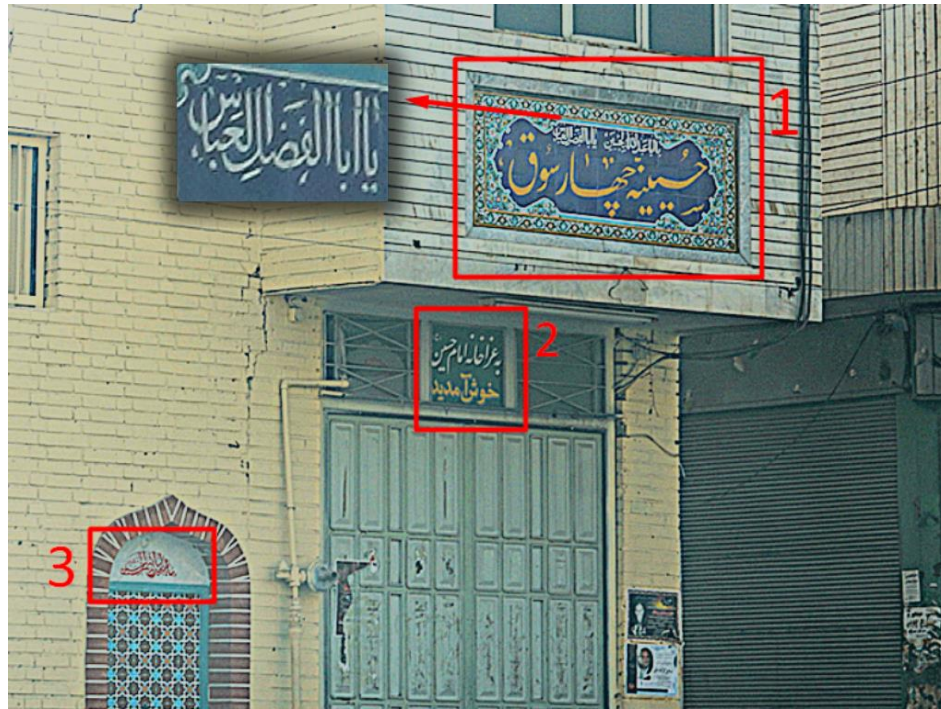


Image 7

### **Agency and Theme**

In terms of agency, 203 (67 percent) of the signs are set up by the governments while only 64 (21 percent) of them are nongovernmental and are set up by the public. About 36 (12 percent) were labelled as unknown, meaning that their related agent was not clear. This can be an indicator of the power relations between the government and the citizens, governments dominating. However, considering the fact that all the traffic signs are included in this research and they belong to the governmental signs category, this conclusion is not necessarily reliable.

The religious signs are divided into five categories thematically, depending on their content and their message. It is important to note that each sign might belong to more than one category and some signs might belong to none. The categories are formulated intuitively by observation and are the recurring themes in the religious signs.

#### **- Ethics and Principles**

One of the recurring concepts in religious signs related to the Ethics and Principles category is martyrdom. Most places e.g. squares, streets, and alleys are named after the martyrs from the Iran-Iraq war, or other missions related to wars in Islamic countries such as Syria. There are some billboards in the main streets that commemorate their sacrifices for the country and their principles. In one sign, the city of Najafabad is presented as ‘The City of Science and Sacrifice’. Image 8 shows an sculpture of Mohsen Hojaji, a military officer from Iran who was operating in Syria during the Syrian civil war and was martyred in 2017. Since he was from the city of Najafabad, the reactions led to naming places, including streets, institutions, buildings, etc. in the city after him. The blue sign in front of the sculpture states *Hojjat-e Khoda* (حجت خدا)

which means ‘The evidence of God’. This alludes to his last name ‘Hojaji’ which is the plural of ‘Hojat’ meaning Evidence.



*Image 8*

There are similar governmental signs praising the martyrs of Islam and of course, promoting the ideology of martyrdom as a blessing or virtuous action and this affects the public’s (those who believe in and practice religion in private life) view on life, ethics, relations with other countries, etc. The promotion or imposition of the ideology can be indirect, because mere exposure to such signs can influence individuals, but do not necessarily impose the ideology.

Another example related to the Ethics and Principles category is the sign stickered on the entrance of a lingerie shop, stating that ‘men are not allowed inside’. It is due to the idea that it is provocative for men to enter such stores and their presence in the shop together with women violates the privacy and safety of women. As visible in Image 9, the window is open to the public and therefore, there are only women’s tops and shirts in the vitrine instead of lingerie. This is a strict rule in the country and if a storeowner does not have the sign, they will receive warnings and the storeowners will be held responsible.



Image 9

There are signs that address *Irshad*, the public duty to guide and direct (one another) to the right path. This word is used in different signs, such as street names or buildings. There is a governmental organization called the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which is responsible for managing access to media that in the view of the Iranian government violate Iranian ethics or promote values alien to Iranian culture. Image 10 is the sign of the local office of the same organization in the city of Najafabad. What makes the signs in Image 9 and Image 10 and similar types of signs interesting is that they are set up to promote a better and healthier life, while on the contrary, freedom of choice and diversity are minimized by the suppression in society. This not only manages the language in the landscape, but also the lifestyle and way of thinking of the people nudging them in one specific direction.





Image 10

- **Political matters**

The number of religious-political signs in the landscape of the city is 129 (42 percent), and as mentioned previously, these signs address a political figure, event, concept, etc. One recurring political sign is the national flag indicated in Image 2. Some sign are related to the governmental organizations such as the Revolutionary Guard or Basij Organization. These signs could be set up on relevant buildings, or on billboards promoting the values and policies of the organizations. The political billboard in Image 11 is from the intelligent service related to the government and it encourages the citizens to report any anti-government behavior to them.



Image 11

The navigation signs that have a link to religion and politics fall into this category as well. For instance, the main square of the city and one of the main streets are named after *Ayatullah Khomeini*, who initiated the Islamic Revolution in the 1970s and therefore is a religious and political figure. Also, as indicated in Image 12, there is a square named *Dey 9* (30 December) which is the date of the 2009 Ashura protests in Iran. This event is both religious and political because the protests took place on one of the most significant holy days of Shi'a Islam and was combined with religious rituals.



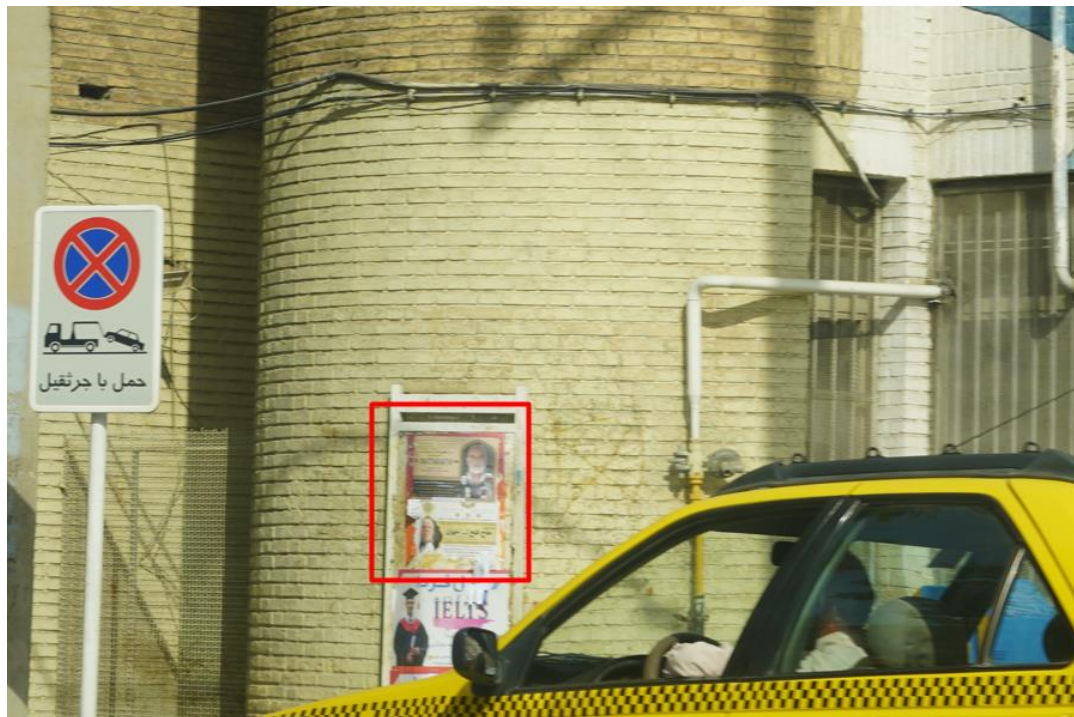
Image 12



These types of signs that address a political matter while pointing to a religious concept as well, as in Images 11 and 12, seem to be targeting the devoted religious citizens for political purposes. The religious citizens may look at religion as a holy and unquestionable entity and when a religious sign is combined with political messages, it can be hard to distinguish between the religious and political aspects and comprehend the sign critically.

#### - *Traditions*

Religious signs can address a tradition that has ties with religion. For commemoration of a deceased person, on the fortieth day after their passing is important to have a ceremony. For that day, announcements will be stickered around the city in which there is usually a verse of the Quran or a poem together with their photo and details about the time and place of the ceremony as an invitation for people to attend. Image 13 shows two of these announcements on one small announcement board.



*Image 13*

Another tradition is concerned with Ashura, the commemoration of Imam Hussain's martyrdom. During the month of Muharram, Muslims give out food known as Nazri to the crowd. Giving out Nazri and eating is a recommended act in Islam and is a part of Iranian tradition. Therefore, there are kitchens designed for cooking Nazri and celebrating such religious ceremonies. In Image 14, the sign of a religious kitchen named after Imam Hussain is visible.



Image 14

Both of the traditions displayed in Image 13 and Image 14 stem from and are related to the history of the religion of Islam in the first few decades of its formation. Therefore, these traditions can be perceived as pure and untainted aspects of the religion. Also, the signs related to these traditions point to the social aspect of a religion because they bring a community together to celebrate or to mourn and taking part in each concerns one's social identity and sense of belonging. Therefore, appearance of these signs and traditions reinforces the ideology that the society is involved with.

- **Names**

This category takes in all the signs related to places such as streets, buildings, organizations, etc. with religiously loaded names. Of all the religious signs, 90 (30 percent) are of this type. This number encompasses names of the educational institutes, public and private organizations, brands, shops and department stores, and streets. Examples of these signs can be found in Images 1, 3, 7, 8, 10, 12 and 14. In general, names that are used for streets and places in a setting, usually address concepts that are positive and important to a nation or the ruling system, and the citizens are constantly exposed to them. Therefore, these signs can also ease indirect imposition of values and religious ideologies to the society.

- **Expressions**

Results show that 112 (37 percent) of the religious signs belong to the Expressions category. Such expressions can be found on flags, on wall paintings, or small tiles on some

residential buildings above their entrance. Image 15 frames a few of these tiles with religious writings embedded on the buildings. The majority of these expressions are *Bismillah*, which means ‘In the name of God’. They are not limited to these specific tiles though. Image 16 shows a department store on the exterior wall of which the religious expression of *Bismillah* is painted both in Persian (left), and Arabic (Right). The signs related to this category are used in both public and private signs repeatedly and they mainly signify devotion to religion in a social context, genuine or otherwise. So, one individual or institution may use them in order to link their personal identity to the religious identity which is social. If used by an institution, it is more likely to be for the purpose of attracting and directing those devoted to religion to a specific way.



Image 15



Image 16

The examples above shed light on different aspects of the religion of Islam such as cultural, historical, social and political, as it is presented in the linguistic landscape of the city of Najafabad. The government, as well as the citizens, participate in the formation of the religious signs in the landscape and the design of the signs result in a distinctive landscape with its own specific dynamic.

## **4. Conclusion**

### ***Introduction***

This research aimed to describe religion as it is portrayed in the linguistic landscape of the city of Najafabad in Iran, and shed light on its functionality in this context. As a country with a religious background that is currently ruled by a religious government as well, most of the public spaces are influenced by religion. The religious signs used for this research were collected from the photographs taken by a local photographer. I looked at the language, font, theme and the corresponding agent of the signs, categorized them accordingly, and explicated each by presenting quantitative and qualitative data. Also, in each part, I gave an account of the role religion plays in the linguistic landscape of the city.

### ***Summary of the main results***

The results from Table 2 indicate that Persian is the most widely used language (61 percent) in the religious signs as it is the main and official language of the country. The Arabic signs exceeds the number of English signs in the landscape with Arabic used in 44 percent of the signs and English in only 16 percent. This is not surprising since Arabic is the language of the Quran and is associated with the religion of Islam. Fonts (styles of writing) as indicated in the same table are found in five styles: Digital print style is the most dominant in 59 percent of the signs, followed by Persian calligraphy style in 32 percent, and Islamic calligraphy style in 18 percent. The two other categories, which were created through the labeling process, are the Logo style and the English categories, which constitute 4 and 0.3 percent respectively. In terms of agency, the governmental or top-down signs surpass the nongovernmental or the bottom-up by 67 percent over 21 percent. The religious signs were diverse thematically and in terms of content, they were divided into five the categories of Political Matters (41 percent), Islamic Expressions (37 percent), Names (30 percent), Ethics and Principles (19 percent), and Traditions (15 percent), in order of frequency.

### ***Answers to the research questions***

In answer to the first research question, “how religion is portrayed in the linguistic landscape of Najafabad”, four other detailed questions have been posed. These question look at the languages used in the signs, font as a visual aspect of the signs, themes and content of the texts in the signs, and the corresponding agent or creator. The answers to the questions have been



given in Table 2 and briefly summarized in the previous paragraph. Religion is portrayed in the signs that are related to both governmental and nongovernmental sectors and as a multidimensional notion, it manifests in signs with various concepts such as traditions, values, invocations, politics, etc. Also, it is used in all the languages that are used in the landscape, i.e. Persian, Arabic and English.

The second research question is; “what is the function and role of religion in the landscape of the city”. The results from the research indicate that religion as a theme plays a dominant role in formation of the linguistic landscape of Najafabad. Both top-down and bottom-up forces play their diverse roles, firstly in appearance of religion in the linguistic landscape, and secondly in the reinforcement of religion as a living ideology in the landscape of the city. In the top-down signs, we can observe that religion is used as a tool by the ruling system to be involved with the society, manage the language used in the landscape, and promote its ideologies. On the other hand, this society with its religious collective identity is encouraged and motivated to contribute from bottom-up. Furthermore, freedom in presentation of self, whether opposing or merely differing from the current ideologies is not be tolerated. In brief, appearance of religion in the landscape of the city is appreciated by both the ruling system and the society.

### ***Comparison with other research***

Although linguistic landscape research has been initiated on religious signs and in Iran, the results in some are compatible with the results of this research and some are not. In the research on religious signs in the city of Edo Ekiti, Nigeria, the three languages of English, Arabic and Yoruba are mentioned to be visible. One of the functions of Arabic in that city is similar to Najafabad: to show the inherent attachment of the language to Islam.

In Mirvahedi’s research on the language use in the landscape of Tabriz (2016), results show that the dominant language in the landscape is Persian despite the fact that the native tongue of the residents in the city of Tabriz is Azerbaijani. He concludes that top-down signs, the absence of Azerbaijani is a sign of lack of support and protective policies in order to promote and promulgate the use of the language in the public space and the local community who speak Azerbaijani are becoming weak and marginalized because Persian and Persian speakers have been given the highest priority.

In the conclusion of their investigation on the typological errors in the landscape of Tehran, Mohebbi and Firuzkahi (2021) refer to Hayati and Mashhadi (2010) and Khubchandani (2008) to make the point that the top-down English signs have a high number of errors. They presume that it is due to the planning and policies of the government, which has conservative views about English, as a potential hazard to the sociocultural identity, propagating western linguistic, economic, cultural, and political ideologies.

Results from this research are not compatible with that of Rezaei and Tadayyon (2018) though. In their research, they conclude that the government has an open policy towards the Armanians of Isfahan to display their self and identity. Nevertheless, Julfa neighborhood as an Armenian district is separate and dedicated to this ethnic and linguistic group historically and

currently, its significance as a tourist attraction makes it a different setting and case study from the city of Najafabad.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

There were a few limitations to this research. Firstly, since this research was done from a distance, accessing to the images was time consuming due to lack of a proper file-sharing platform and high-speed internet. Secondly, despite the fact that the photos were of a high quality, they did not cover all angles of the city and I did not have a choice as to which signs were captured. Thirdly, the scope of this research as a thesis did not allow doing investigation on other categories of signs other than religious, and they are potential topics of investigation for future research.

In continuation of this research, the perception of the public from the linguistic landscape of the city can be looked into. Further research on the same topic in other cities of Iran or abroad are also advised. Considering the fact that Iran is going through a revolution, this research may soon become a singular historical account of the linguistic landscape of this city. Therefore, similar research on the same setting years from now can indicate the change and development the linguistic landscape of the city has experienced. Since it is an exposition of a public space loaded with religion in a non-secular state, this research can be referred to in the future studies in the fields of linguistics, political studies and history or for comparative research.

### ***Implications and Discussion***

The results of this research aligns with the four principles of structuration introduced by Ben-Rafael (2009) and in the following, I will elaborate how the principles of structuration can be means to explain the role and function of religion in the top-down and bottom-up signs in the city of Najafabad.

In the governmental signs used top-down, the four principles of structuration (presentation of self, good reasons, power relations, and collective identity) defined in Section 1.3 are involved. The top-down signs are higher in number and they have the capacity to control and regulate the linguistic landscape through language policy and management (power relations) (Landry and Bourhis, 1997). Besides, constructing signs that are cleverly combined with religion (good reasons) encourages the society to take part and build values for a society that has a collective identity that is loyal to the system (collective identity).

On the other hand, the bottom-up signs are affected by the top-down due to their subordination (power relations). Some values of the system are imposed on the society by the policies and these restrictions do not allow one to deviate from them. Therefore, there will be no room left for diversity and personal choices (presentation of self). Also, in cases where there are no restrictions, following a value that comes from the society, whether it is from the culture or system, is easier than thinking critically and making decisions and that is when sticking to the identity that society gives would be the first choice for some (collective identity).

Overall, religion seems to be a prominent theme for the citizens as a social, cultural and identity-related notion and functions for the ruling system as a means for language management to maintain its dominance and power.

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