How Does the Language Representation Index (LRI) in Koreatown Vary Across its Subdivisions and Does This Variation Correlate with Differences in Median income?

Celia Kebbeh

Professor Ji Young Kim

Spanish 160

21 March 2025

Introduction

Language in public space is more than a communication tool, but a marker of identity, power, and assertion. In multilingual neighborhoods, how much a language is present reveals broader understandings to linguistic hierarchies that ultimately shape social ones. Located in a linguistically diverse neighborhood in Central Los Angeles, Koreatown has a median household income below the city and national average, making it a critical place to study how language visibility and representation relate to economic status (United States Census Bureau). In this study, I use the Language Representation Index (LRI), a metric that measures the visibility of a particular language in relation to how much it is spoken at home, to assess how much Koreatown's linguistic communities are represented across its divisions. By analyzing who is, and who isn't, represented linguistically would shed light on how symbolic exclusion can reflect economic inequality in urban spaces.

Literature Review

How language appears in public spaces is fundamental in understanding its power and relevance in a particular setting. Beyond its communication assets, the use of language in public spaces serves as an assertion of a particular group in its respective neighborhood. How much a language is visible in public reflects deeper structural hierarchies that shed light on the just–or unjust– access to economic and institutional resources as well as the ability to integrate as a whole in a community. This concept is central in understanding how language use in environments mirror the social, cultural, and political realities of its respective communities. One of the core frameworks within this field of linguistic landscape studies, is the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality, developed by Landry and Bourhis, which interprets the language representation, particularly in multilingual neighborhoods.

In their foundational study, “Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality,” Landry and Bourhis (1997) defined the linguistic landscape as “the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region” (23). This concept illustrates how language visibility in public spaces reflects the relative power and status of linguistic communities (Landry and Bourhis 25). A key component of their theory is ethnolinguistic vitality, described as “the strength of a group’s presence in a particular territory, as reflected by the frequency and quality of language use in public signs” (Landry and Bourhis 24). They argue that public signs have both an informational function, which communicates to consumers, and a symbolic function, which reflect a linguistic group’s social position in a given community (Landry and Bourhis 25). Ultimately, they emphasize that signage, through its functions, informs us about which groups are viewed as legitimate, visible and influential in a neighborhood.

While Landry and Bourhis illustrate how linguistic landscapes define ethnolinguistic vitality, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of linguistic capital explains why certain languages are tied to greater value. In “Language and Symbolic Power,” Bourdieu argues that the use of language isn’t a neutral form of communication as it holds symbolic power: “language is not only an instrument of communication or even knowledge, but also an instrument of power (37). There is an uneven distribution of power where certain manners of speaking posits more prestige and legitimacy than others due to respective ties with bureaucratic institutions such as education, government, and media: “it tends to provoke a return to the sense that is most overtly charged with social connotations” (Bourdieu 40). He explains it as linguistic capital where language is related to a broader set of capital forms such as economic and cultural capital, which ultimately defines the speaker’s status in a social space (Bourdieu 18). There is a kind of symbolic profit drawn from language as the more linguistic capital a speaker possesses, the more they are able to be of advantage and secure a higher kind of profit (Bourdieu 18). Moreover, he explains how linguistic capital operates within social hierarchies where the languages that carry the most social and economic advantage are ones that are not accessible to all. Distinctly, as scarcity increases value – or the more limited a language is– only those who carry that "right" language benefit (18). Bourdieu frames language as a market since different languages have distinct levels of value, which ultimately reinforces exclusivity, especially in lower-status environments.

Therefore, according to Bourdieu and his linkings of language capital with the same economic principles as other forms of capital, it could be suggested that if a language is highly represented in an area but does not hold strong institutional structures, its overrepresentation could reflect lower economic capital. Contrastingly, if a language is used less frequently–or is more visible– but is linked with prestigious institutions, that language would hold greater value. Yet, if a certain language has lower visibility in a higher-income area, despite being widely spoken, it would be tied with a lower value as linguistic capital in the commercial sector. Hence, some businesses may be more inclined to choose signage in certain languages to signal status rather than to communicate. Additionally, those who speak the dominant language in a way that conforms to more prestigious norms are more likely to gain economic and social opportunities while languages that are widely spoken without a lack of institutional support may hold lower symbolic and economic value.

As Bourdieu argues why certain languages have more capital than others, Al Issa and Dahan's study reflect how institutions reinforce these linguistic hierarchies. In their article "Linguistic Capital in the University of Hegemony of English,' they argue that English serves as a gatekeeping mechanism, shaping who gains access to higher professional opportunities (Al Issa and Dahan 3). English is the hegemonic language that grants advantage or serves as a tool for marginalization as its mastery shapes the hierarchies of inclusion in the academic domain (Al Issa and Dahan 4). This reveals that not only institutions have hierarchies of linguistic capital but they actively create and enforce it by setting distinct linguistic standards for social and economic inclusions. While their focus is academic settings, this applies to urban and commercial spaces, where the prioritization of one language over another reinforces a structural access to resources, economic power, and belonging. Privileging English as the dominant language in public settings reflects how language is an overall system of inclusion and exclusion, shaped by bureaucratic institutions.

These literatures on linguistic landscapes, linguistic capital, and institutionalized language hierarchies offer a critical framework for analyzing Koreatown's linguistic representation and its correlation to the neighborhood's economic status. By applying the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality, I will explore whether certain languages are overrepresented or underrepresented in Koreatown's public signs in relation to their presence in distinct areas of the neighborhood. Furthermore, Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital would permit me to evaluate if a higher LRI of a certain language in wealthier divisions of Koreatown could indicate that the language holds greater symbolic and economic capital, while a lower LRI in lower-income divisions could suggest marginalization or exclusion from bureaucratic structures. Finally, using Al-Issa and Dahan's findings, I would discover whether institutional forces truly shape the linguistic landscape by prioritizing a language over the other.

Altogether, this brings me to the specific curiosity of whether or not there is a relationship between the Linguistic Representation Index (LRI) and the median income within Koreatown. This research will examine if the representation of a certain language– whether under or greatly represented– would have an effect on the economic status within divisions of Koreatown.

Methods

In order to find the LRIs of Koreatown's divisions, I collected data from an exhaustive research that gathered all of Koreatown's public signs within all of its divisions. The divisions are divided into 4 categories, 2-5, with respective census tracts (2125.01, 2125.02, 2124.10, 2124.20, 2132.01, 2123.04, 2123.05 ; 2117.03, 2117.04, 2118.02, 2118.03, 2118.04, 2119.1, 2121.02 ; 2115, 2114.1, 2114.2, 2112.01, 2113.1 ; 2112.02, 2113.2, 2111.21, 2111.22, 2119.21, 2119.22, 2111.24.) Then, I used the analysis of those signs that determined which languages were more dominant overall. The number of times a language was used throughout all signs was then divided by the number of signs in total. That percentage was then divided by the percentage of the language spoken at home (collected through US Census Bureau) to get the LRIs for all languages represented. The LRIs were distributed within each of Koreatown's divisions. An LRI above 1 indicates overrepresentation in signage relative to home use, while an LRI below 1 indicates underrepresentation.

Furthermore, to determine the median household income for each division, I used census data for 2023 (In 2023 inflation-adjusted dollars). To compare across divisions, I compiled the data from each of its respective census tracts for each division. I multiplied the estimated income by unit number for each census district to find the total income. I added all the total incomes from all census tracts. Then, I divided that total income for the whole division by the total number of occupied units to find the average income per household for the division. This average is what I used to compare to the LRI to analyze a possible relationship between the two.

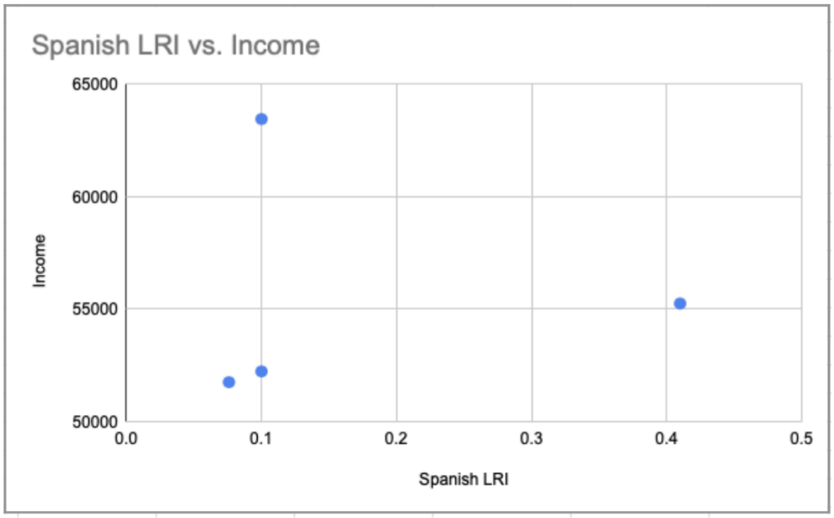
Additionally, I calculated the LRI for an average person to determine how much the people in each division felt represented on average. To do that, I multiplied each LRI by the percentage of its respective language spoken at home and added all the average LRIs for one weighted average LRI.

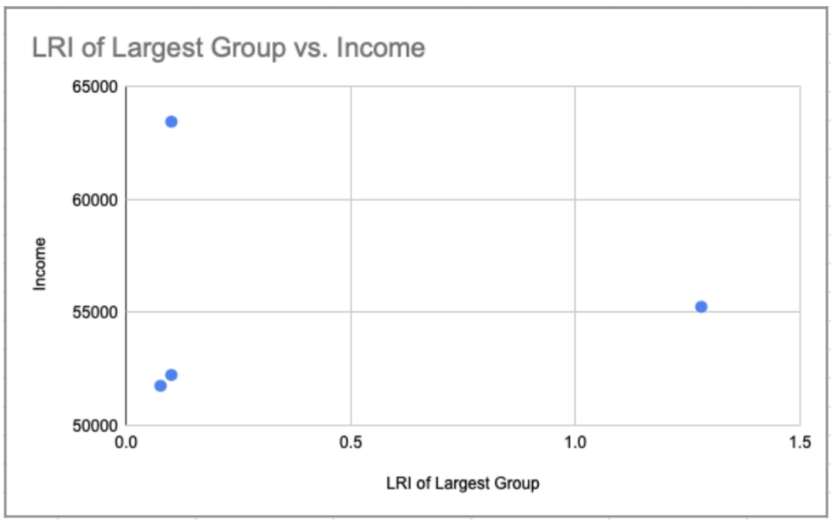
Results

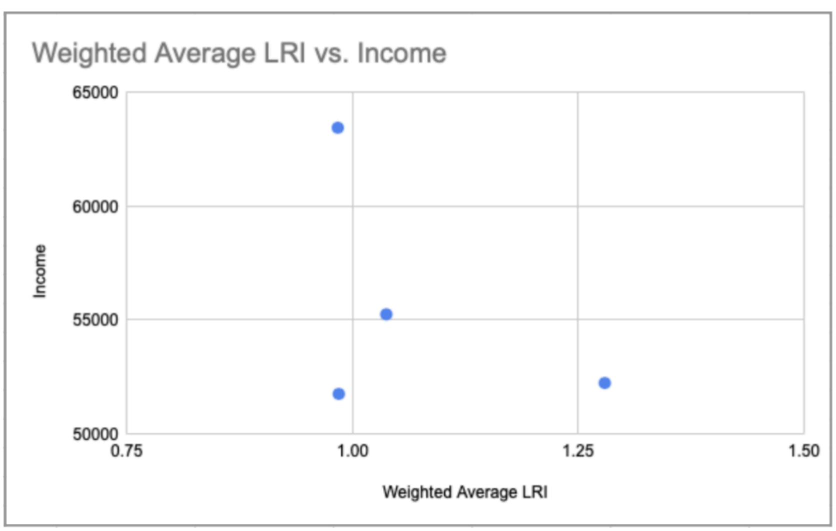
Across all divisions of Koreatown, the data reveals that Spanish is consistently the most spoken language at home in every division except for division 5. However, despite this demographic dominance, Spanish does not have the highest LRI in any division. The LRI remains disproportionately low throughout all divisions, with the highest Spanish LRI being 0.41. Meanwhile, English and Korean are overrepresented, particularly in higher-income areas.

Division	Median Income	Spanish LRI (Language Spoken at Home %)	English LRI	Korean LRI
Division 2	~$52,230	0.10 (46.9%)	3.4	2.0
Division 3	~$51,751	0.0759 (32.66%)	2.1691	1.0063
Division 4	**~$63,456**	0.10 (44.6%)	2.0	2.23
Division 5	~$55,250	0.41 (39.4%)	1.28	0.40

To fully grasp an assessment of the relationship between language representation and income, I compared the LRI and median household income across Koreatown's divisions using three specific measurements: Spanish LRI vs. income; LRI of the largest linguistic group vs. income; and weighted average LRI vs. income. The results are visualized in the graphs below.


Spanish LRI vs. Income
65000
60000
55000
50000
Income
0.0
0.1
0.2
0.3
0.4
0.5
Spanish LRI


LRI of Largest Group vs. Income
65000
60000
55000
50000
Income
0.0
0.5
1.0
1.5
LRI of Largest Group


Weighted Average LRI vs. Income
65000
60000
55000
50000
Income
0.75
1.00
1.25
1.50
Weighted Average LRI

The LRI of the largest language group in each division– whether Spanish or English– shows wide variation, but there is no consistent trend correlating high LRI with high or low income. Additionally, the weighted average LRI, which reflects the linguistic representation experienced by an average person in each division, has a slight negative correlation. So, as the weighted average LRI increases, the median income across divisions slightly decreases.

Discussion

While no strong correlation emerged between income and individual LRIs by language, the relationship between the weighted average LRI and median household income across Koreatown's divisions show a slight negative correlation. This indicates that as income increases, the average level of linguistic representation felt by people within those divisions tends to decrease. Although the correlation is not very strong, this still challenges the commonly held discourse that wealthier neighborhoods have greater inclusivity and diversity. In this context, Division 4, the wealthiest division in this study with a median income of ~$63,456, had one of the lowest weighted average LRIs, meaning that the average person felt less represented in the linguistic public space. In contrast, Divisions 2 and 3, with significantly lower median incomes, had higher weighted LRIs, indicating slightly more representation felt on average.

This aligns with Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital, where linguistic representation is shaped by symbolic and institutional capital rather than the demography. Thus, it can be inferred that in Koreatown, English and Korean have higher capital as they have high LRI values when those languages are not the most widely spoken at home. These findings furthermore tie with Al-Issa and Dahan's framework, which states that English is institutionally privileged and used as a tool of inclusion or marginalization. Therefore, in Koreatown, there seems to be an economic strategy and preference over English, where there is an active use of English by both corporate and non corporate businesses. Not only could this be explained by the concept that English holds greater social value and preference due to institutional hierarchies, but there could also be a fear and thus intentful avoidance of the use of other languages, especially when it comes to Spanish. Being associated with negative connotations due to the political climate of the nation, the use of Spanish in commercial, public signage might seem of greater risk in relation to economic success. Thus, linguistic visibility in wealthier areas may reflect commercial strategy and social prestige more than inclusivity or demographic accuracy.

Ultimately, the vast underrepresentation of Spanish, despite it being the most spoken language at home in nearly all divisions, is a clear reflection of marginalization. Therefore, as Bourdieu explained that low visibility, despite high usage, indicates a weak economic influence, Spanish having a low LRI strongly lacks economic and social power, reinforcing class stratification. This further resonates with Landry and Bourhis's concept of ethnolinguistic vitality. Since Spanish is not the language that dominates the linguistic landscape, although being the majority-spoken language, it can be strongly inferred that Spanish speaking residents are similarly situated at a lower hierarchy and hold weaker social presence and belonging in Koreatown.

Conclusion

This study reveals that linguistic representation in Koreatown does not reflect the demographic reality but rather broader patterns of economic power and institutional hierarchies. These findings expose how language can be corrupted to reinforce concepts of stratification and economic inequality. Although this study sheds light on the linguistic trends of Koreatown, the analysis is relevant on a broader scale, as it highlights how the improper structural connotations and capital held within a language must be actively destructed to cease the discriminatory homogenic pattern and erasure of minority languages.

Works Cited

- Landry, Rodrigue, and Richard Y. Bourhis. "Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1997, pp. 23–49. *SAGE Publications*
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power.* Edited by John B. Thompson, translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Al-Issa, Ali, and Laila S. Dahan. "Linguistic Capital in the University and the Hegemony of English." *SAGE Open*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2021, pp. 1–12. *SAGE Journals.*
- United States Census Bureau. *QuickFacts: Los Angeles County, California*. 2023, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/losangelescountycalifornia.

Appendix

Div 2	Income	Occupied housing units	
2125.01,	55625	922	51286250
2125.02,	63500	1702	108077000
2124.10,	51265	1662	85202430
2124.20,	55106	1138	62710628
2132.01,	41987	1702	71461874
2123.04,	47500	796	37810000
2123.05	49400	982	48510800
Total		8904	52230.34389

Language	Linguistic Landscape	Language Spoken at Home	LRI
English	85.6%	25%	3.4
Korean	38%	18.7%	2.0
Spanish	6.9%	46.9%	0.1
Tagalog	-	3.7%	-
Chinese	0.8%	2.79%	0.3
Russian	-	0.37%	-
Japanese	0.3%	–	-
Italian	0.3%	–	-
French	0.3%	0.2%	1.5

Div 3	Income	Occupied housing units	
2117.03	59840	2182	130570880
2117.04	54931	1652	90746012
2118.02	50995	2175	110914125
2118.03	52370	1741	91176170
2118.04	49242	1334	65688828
2119.1	51895	1939	100624405
2121.02	36830	1291	47547530
Total		12314	51751.49829

Language	Linguistic Landscape	Language Spoken	LRI
English	68.11	31.40	2.1691
Japanese	1.55	N/A	N/A
Spanish	2.48	32.66	0.0759
Korean	25.39	25.23	1.0063
Chinese	2.48	1.82	1.3626
Tagalog	0	8.07	0
Russian & other Slavic	0	0.83	0

Div 4	Income	Occupied housing units	
2115	89688	1867	167447496
2114.1	48952	1126	55119952
2114.2	58835	1259	74073265
2112.01	62237	1104	68709648
2113.1	46966	1545	72562470
Total		6901	63456.4311

Language	Linguistic Landscape	Language Spoken at Home	LRI
English	63.9%	31.9%	2
Korean	30.8%	13.4%	2.23
Spanish	4.3%	44.6%	0.10
Thai	0.2%	-	-
Chinese	0.2%	1.2%	0.17
Bengali	0.6%	-	-
Tagalog	0	9%	0

Div 5	Income	Occupied housing units	
2112.02	51627	1039	53640453
2113.2	50000	1198	59900000
2111.21	70167	1002	70307334
2111.22	48830	1201	58644830
2119.21	42071	922	38789462
2119.22	51803	1371	71021913
2111.24	65000	2020	131300000
Total		8753	55250.08477

Language	Linguistic Landscape	Language Spoken at Home	LRI
English	74.28	58.6	1.28
Spanish	16.30	39.4	0.41
Korean	6.52	16.1	0.40
Japanese	0.74	-	-
Bengali	0.74	-	-
Mandarin Chinese	0.36	3.1	0.12
Thai	0.36	-	-
Tagalog	0.36	7.1	0.05
N/A	0.36	-	-