Written multilingualism and linguistic landscapes in Africa have been investigated in a number of recent studies (e.g. Reh 2004, Kamwangamalu 2008, Okanlawon and Oluga 2008, Lanza and Woldemariam 2009, Rosendal 2009, Stroud and Mpendukana 2009, Ngwenya 2011). Reh (2004) discusses different forms of written multilingual writing and distinguishes between ‘duplicating multilingual writing’, where exactly the same text is presented in more than one language, ‘fragmentary multilingual writing’, where the full information is given only in one language, but selected parts are translated into an additional language or additional languages, and ‘complementary multilingual writing’, where some information is given in one language, and some other information is given in an additional language or additional languages. Case studies from different African countries have shown the use of multilingual writing in public settings on signs, advertising and other public displays, in contexts which have been called the ‘linguistic landscape’: ‘the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region’ (Landry and Bourhis 1997: 23). The studies demonstrate the use of African languages in public domains, and in association with symbols of modernity such as mobile phones and banking. The use of African languages in the linguistic landscape in many African countries is part of a renewed ‘African language renaissance’: The increased use of African languages in a variety of domains, functions and public discourses, including media, music, film and education, in the 21st century, brought about through a mixture of advocacy, regionalisation, technology development and change in attitudes (Marten 2012). This development is also taking place in the linguistic landscape in Zambia.

Zambia’s post-colonial language policy placed strong emphasis on English, which became the official language and dominant in all spheres of public life, including education, politics, business, economics and the media (Chanda 1996, Kashoki 1990, Marten and Kula 2008b). There are about 40-50 languages/dialect clusters spoken in Zambia (the official number of different languages is 72) and seven African languages are designated as national languages: Bemba, Nyanja, Lozi, Tonga, Kaonde, Luvale, and Lunda. However, the role of African languages in public and official discourse is largely symbolic, even though African languages are used in day-to-day life by the majority of Zambians (Marten and Kula 2008a). The two most widely used languages, Bemba and Nyanja, are each spoken as first and second language by about half of the population, while English is only spoken by about a quarter. In written discourse, English has historically been dominant, and this is also true of the linguistic landscape. However, African languages often enter this domain as fragments, that is, as words, phrases or sometimes sentences which often do not constitute a meaningful, complete text in themselves, and which typically do not contribute to the core propositional meaning of the (English-based) text. The contribution of the African language fragments is pragmatic, and adds additional messages to the text, constituting instances of complementary multilingual writing. The functions of these African language fragments are predominantly symbolic, and they often serve to localize a global message in the particular Zambian context, and to
demonstrate understanding of and identification with African culture. African language fragments are also used to access cultural and social spaces which are associated with African languages, such as local communication involving family and friends. Examples of African language fragments are often found in mobile phone advertising, such as in the text of the MTN advert below.

(1) MTN Chalila billboard advert (English/Bemba, Ndola, Zambia, May 2011)

Free weekday calling Tue Wed Thur
Tuesday Njikata [‘Tuesday be mine’ (lit.: ‘Tuesday hold me’)]

Chalila! [‘It’s happening’ (lit.: ‘It has sounded’) ] Talk for free during the week.

Top up on Tuesdays and enjoy free minutes

To register, simply dial *333*1# or sms *1# to 333
The main content in example (1) is presented in English, and without knowledge of English, the message of the advertisement is inaccessible. However, the Bemba fragments *Njikata* and *Chalila* provide the theme of the advert. Like in (1), Zambian languages often enter English advertising and other commercial texts as fragments, serving to localise or regionalise an otherwise unspecific, global message, and to invoke and access cultural and social spaces typically associated with African languages, such as respect, informality, and personal domains. The use of Zambian languages is thus symbolic, serving to claim specific associations with the message, rather than as functioning to convey the message itself. The Zambian situation differs from many other instances of multilingual public writing in Africa, for example in Ethiopia, South Africa, Tanzania, or Uganda, where African languages are more widely used in main advertising texts, while English enters in the form of fragments. This reflects in part differences in the sociolinguistic situations of these different contexts, and shows that multilingual public writing is embedded in (and hence is affected by and influences) local language practices, policy and planning.

References