

The Competition between Romanised Scripts in Public Space: a Linguistic Landscape Study of Shop Signs in Zhanjiang

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ABSTRACT. *Linguistic landscape provides a gateway to capturing unnoticeable changes that are taking place in a given region. As economic globalisation is now expanding in the world, it is of research significance to see how the trend has been reflected in actual language practice. To find out the answer, this paper examines the code choice and the code patterns of shop signs in a less-affluent street of Zhanjiang. Despite the strong presence of Chinese in public space, the competition between Romanised scripts is evidently witnessed. Though English and Hanyu pinyin are popular Romanised systems in public signage, research findings show that on bilingual signs, English instead of Hanyu pinyin has won the favour of local shop owners because it is associated with internationalisation and high quality. As the influence of English continues to expand in China, the study suggests that even in less-affluent regions, English has begun to challenge the status of Hanyu pinyin in sign design at non-official level.*

KEYWORDS: *Linguistic landscape, Zhanjiang, Globalisation, English, Hanyu pinyin*

1. Introduction

Linguistic landscape, a newly developed research angle in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, adds an innovative view to the understanding of language situations in a multilingual setting (Gorter, 2013). The term linguistic landscape (LL) was first put forward by Landry and Bourhis (1997) in their research on ethnolinguistic vitality across Canada. LL in the research which primarily focused on its role in language behaviour and language perception was referred to “the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs” in a given locality (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). The languages displayed on public signs, as part of local linguistic resources, combine to present a vivid picture of linguistic diversity. The definition of LL thus became widely accepted and has been frequently quoted in

literature and empirical LL studies. Research perspectives of the field so far have included the power and status of languages in bilingual/multilingual contexts (Ben-Rafael, et al., 2006; Cenoz & Gorter, 2006), the gap between language policy and language practice (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006; Baranova & Fedorova, 2019), the role of English in globalisation (Ben-Rafael, et al., 2006; Huebner, 2006; Tan & Tan, 2015) as well as language contact resulting from the influx of tourists and immigrants (Huebner, 2006; Blommaert, 2013).

Today, globalisation and modernisation have accelerated cultural exchange, making multilingualism a common feature of modern cities. The presence of foreign languages in public space as a result of globalisation is not rarely seen in countries that are traditionally monolingual. As urbanisation continues to rescale the social structure of a country, multilingualism of various forms can be easily identified in urban areas.

Among foreign languages identified in past LL research, English, now a common language for international communication, has gained high visibility in non-English speaking countries. Previous LL research conducted in different localities has revealed that the language is now a symbol of prestige and affluence (Tan & Tan, 2015) associated with internationalisation and modernisation (Jaworski & Yeung, 2010). Very often English appears either alone on monolingual signs or in combination with a local language on bilingual/multilingual signs. The spread of English in non-English speaking regions has raised social concerns as the language may influence the development of a local language. Huebner (2006) highlighted how English has affected Thai through lexical borrowing, phonology and orthography. The study concluded the changes as a result of language contact in a multilingual world. Contrary results are also found in LL research that the increasing use of English on portable signs does not contaminate a local language (Alomoush, 2019).

In China, LL has been extensively examined in the past ten years as the interest in linguistic diversity gradually grows. In fact, English in public signage has attracted scholarly attention in China since 2000s when researchers focused on the translation of sign information. By analysing the translation errors on bilingual signs, Chinese scholars proposed practical translation strategies for sign translation in public space (Bei & Shan, 2002; Lv, 2004). Sun (2009) adopted the term LL in her study. Nevertheless, her research was not much different from the previous studies on public signs as her research aimed at the regulation of English translation in public space. LL research beyond translation focus was not found until Li (2011) investigated private (or bottom-up) signs of Beijing Road in Guangzhou and concluded the trend of globalisation revealed from bilingual signs. Since then, LL studies have gone beyond translation analysis and turned to linguistic diversity in the public space of China. So far, the use of English as a status marker has been discussed in a number of LL studies conducted in the social context of China, but most studies often stop at the quantitative calculation of English signs in cities. Many studies did not distinguish the features of different Romanised scripts on signs. Wang and Ye (2016) discussed the code patterns on multilingual signs and found innovative use of code mixing in public signage. It was believed the code patterns

with a combination of Chinese characters, *Hanyu pinyin* and English were not randomly selected by sign makers but might indicate the inequality of language status. Thus they concluded that such innovative patterns might suggest the wrestling between localisation and globalisation that was taking place in China. Romanised systems such as English and *Hanyu pinyin* (i.e. Romanised Chinese phonetic system) are often made use of as linguistic resources to demonstrate an affluent or international image (Han & Wu, 2020). Yet the two Romanised systems differ in visibility when the economic status of a given region is taken into consideration. The symbolic function of English in wealthy regions is usually taken up by *Hanyu pinyin* in low-end regions for social rescaling (Han & Wu, 2020). Even though the use of Romanised scripts in public space displays a clear-cut distinction, such findings may also suggest that the competition between English and *Hanyu pinyin* for symbolic use could become fiercer as the influence of English continues to expand in China. In fact, the wrestling between the two Romanised systems has already been witnessed on street name signs in China's urban context. Political values have been attached to *Hanyu pinyin*, a politicalised tool, to manifest national ideology, while English, a language of economic value, is still favoured by some local governments and the general public for the purpose of city branding and image building (Shang, 2020). The contestation between English and *Hanyu pinyin* on official signs therefore is a reflection of the conflict between political authority and economic power.

In-depth discussion indicates that as a result of economic globalisation, the wrestling between the two Romanised systems in public space seems inevitable in China. So far LL studies regarding the use of Romanised systems have mostly concentrated on China's megacities, while such competition in less-affluent cities has not been specifically discussed. As economic globalisation is penetrating in every corner of the world, code patterns on signs in less-affluent cities are of equal research value to understand how globalisation has influenced sign makers' decisions on code choice. The present study will therefore focus on private, or bottom-up, signs to examine how globalisation is addressed by grassroots individuals in a city of moderate influence in regional economy. Specific focus will be placed on the choice of Romanised script form displayed on private signs. By doing so, the current research attempts to answer the following questions:

- (1) In what form Romanised scripts have been used on shop signs in a less-affluent city?
- (2) To what extent are English and *Hanyu pinyin* presented in a less-affluent city?
- (3) What does the presence of Romanised systems imply in regard to economic globalisation?

2. Methodology

To address the above research questions, this study has chosen Zhanjiang, a Tier-3 coastal city (see Notes) located in the southwest of Guangdong Province, as

the survey locality. The city-tier classification takes business resources, potential to function as a hub, resident activity, lifestyle diversity and future adaptability as criteria to evaluate the business charm and social development of cities in China. Compared to megacities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, Zhanjiang is a less-affluent city considering its socioeconomic status in China.

Between 1899 and 1945, the city was leased to France. Formerly known as Kwangchow (Guangzhou Bay), the city was renamed Fort Bayard by the French. The act of naming was also found in street names within the area of French administration. The French occupation over Zhanjiang was put to an end when the city was reintegrated into China in 1945. Since the economic reform in the 1980s, the city has been striving to be the economic, political and cultural hub in southwest Guangdong. The city reinforced its interaction with the world when it was listed among the 14 open coastal cities in 1984. The open coastal cities along with the special economic regions served as pioneers to attract overseas investment and deepen economic reform in China. Economic globalisation has brought the city business opportunities for economic development. The city is also eager to gain economic benefits from globalisation and to play a leading role in the regional economy of Beibu Gulf. Since 2000s, local government has made efforts to enhance the city's regional competitiveness, facilitate foreign investments and internationalise the city. As a city undergoing economic transformation to accommodate globalisation, Zhanjiang is of research value. The language practice, especially the choice of Romanised systems, on shop signs can possibly reflect the unnoticeable changes in the city caused by economic globalisation.

2.1 The Research Site

The survey area is Yixian Lu, literally Yat-sen Road, located in the old district of the city. The street was originally constructed by the French during the period of French occupation. The street was first named "Beiding Lu" (probably "Rue Petain" in French), which was then a commercial conflation of department stores, restaurants, cinemas as well as gold and jewellery stores (Editorial Commission of *Chronicles of Geographical Names of Zhanjiang*, 1989). It was later renamed Yixian Lu to commemorate the renowned revolutionary activist Dr. Sun Yat-sen in modern Chinese history. The street used to be a local business centre. As well-developed malls have been constructed in other parts of the city, the street has gradually lost its past reputation. The research site, the busiest zone of Yixian Lu, covers one third of the street with a length of about 330 metres. Now the neighbourhood is a less-affluent area where small businesses are operating, including luncheonettes, herbal medicine stores, groceries and hardware stores. The present study is interested in how the LL in such an area reflects the impact of economic globalisation on language practice.

2.2 Data Collection and Data Processing

Despite the rapid expansion of LL research at home and abroad, what constitutes the unit of analysis is yet to be defined (Gorter, 2006; Gorter, 2013; Shang & Zhao, 2014). So far, a widely adopted principle to define a sign is the approach proposed by Backhaus (2006). That is, any piece of written text is considered a sign. The present study follows this principle in sign selection. In other words, any item with scripts is counted as a unit of analysis, regardless of its size and the amount of information provided (Backhaus, 2006).

Data collection was conducted by taking photos of shop signs in August 2019. To ensure consistency and manageability, data were collected by the same researcher (Lai, 2013). All signs on the shop fronts were included. If an old shop sign was covered by a newly placed one, only the new sign would be counted despite the visibility of the old one. In order to ensure the quality of data, data cleaning was carried out after data collection. Signs were removed from analysis process if they were duplicated in the same presentation style, visually unclear or without linguistic text (Lai, 2013). In total, 195 qualified signs were identified for research analysis.

When defining the types of signs based on the number of languages, the study adopts a more conventional approach. That is, the terms “monolingual”, “bilingual” and “multilingual” respectively refer to a sign written in one language, two languages and three or more languages despite what language(s) is/are displayed (Lai, 2013; Han & Wu, 2020). Preliminary observations showed that signs collected in the research area were monolingual and bilingual. Romanised scripts on the signs were in different forms, i.e. English, Roman letters, *Hanyu pinyin* and Cantonese phonetics. The present study would not distinguish the forms of Romanised scripts and thus a sign with Chinese and any Romanised script was considered a bilingual sign.

Photos of signs were processed and coded in Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. In this process, essential information of the signs was extracted, including the number of visible languages, type of sign (monolingual or bilingual) and form of Romanised scripts (i.e. English, Roman letters, *Hanyu pinyin*, Cantonese phonetics). It is hoped that the above information could provide some insight into how Romanised scripts have been used in the research locality.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Language Visibility on Shop Signs

Data analysis has revealed that shop signs are categorised into monolingual and bilingual signs. As shown in Table 1, nearly 74% (N=143) of the total sign samples are written in Chinese only. Although it is not surprising to find the prevailing use of Chinese in public signage, English monolingual sign is visible despite a rather low percentage, only 1% (N=2). The number of bilingual signs is relatively small (N=50, 25.6%) compared to Chinese monolingual signs, indicating that using Romanised scripts to achieve a certain degree of bilingualism is not common in the locality.

Table 1 Number of Monolingual and Bilingual Signs

Type of Signs	Number of Signs	Percentage
Chinese monolingual	143	73.4%
English monolingual	2	1 %
Chinese-Romanised scripts bilingual	50	25.6%
Total	195	100%

3.2 Romanised Scripts on Bilingual Signs

Though in a small number, bilingual signs can be further categorised into various code patterns depending on the forms of Romanised scripts (Table 2). The common code patterns adopted by local shop owners are Chinese with Roman letters (N=14, 28%, see Figure 1) and Chinese with English words (N=11, 22%, see Figure 2), followed by the patterns with at least two Romanised forms (14%), viz., Chinese with English and Roman letters and Chinese with English and *Hanyu pinyin*.



Figure 1. Chinese with Roman alphabet on shop signs



Figure 2. Chinese with English words on shop signs

are rare on shop signs. Chinese with Romanised scripts are chaotic in their presentation style – often awkward and even confusing (p.189).

Table 2 Romanised Scripts On Bilingual Signs

Romanised scripts on bilingual signs	Number of signs	Percentage
English words	11	22%
<i>Hanyu pinyin</i>	4	8%
Roman letters	14	28%
English words + Roman letters	7	14%
English words + <i>Hanyu pinyin</i>	7	14%
<i>Hanyu pinyin</i> + Roman letters	1	2%
English words + Roman letters + others	2	4%
English words + Cantonese phonetics + others	1	2%
English words + <i>Hanyu pinyin</i> + Roman letters + others	1	2%
others	2	4%
Total	50	100%

* “other” refers to any other Romanised forms (e.g. email address, non-Cantonese phonetics, etc.)

The distributive proportion of each code pattern is no larger than 30%, but English is visible on 58% (N=29) of the bilingual signs, followed by Roman letters, 50% (N=25), regardless of the patterns. On the other hand, the visibility of *Hanyu pinyin* (N=13, 26%), a common Romanised system adopted in less-affluent localities (Han & Wu, 2020), is relatively low in the research area. It seems that even in a less-developed district, English instead of *Hanyu pinyin* is becoming the preferred code to demonstrate the exotic features of goods in a shop.



Figure 3. Fragmentary English information on shop sign



Figure 4. Misspelling in English brand name

Misspelling indicates the shop owners' low English literacy level. In such a low-end neighbourhood, the use of English clearly has nothing to do with the demographic composition of the locality. It demonstrates, however, the shop owner's effort to follow the fashion of using English and create an international image for the brand, although in fact the brand is completely local as revealed from the Chinese character “湛” (zhan, the first character in the name of the city Zhanjiang). Obviously, the shop owner in such a case does not expect a foreign purchaser, but rather a local shopper. Otherwise the misspelling would have been corrected. Fragmentary English information, including words incorrectly spelt, implies the symbolic role English is functioning in the locality. Even in less-affluent regions, English as a symbol of prestige and wealth has been partially adopted on shop signs in non-English speaking countries.

4. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

LL research has provided some empirical evidence about the visibility of languages in Zhanjiang. The study has shown that linguistic resources to some extent have been made use of by grassroots individuals in public language practice. Generally speaking, language practice in the research area has clearly demonstrated the overwhelming influence of Chinese in contrast to the moderate visibility of Romanised scripts in public space.

The pervasiveness of Chinese monolingual signs has confirmed the dominant role of the official language in the less-affluent area of the city. Despite local authorities' proposal to internationalise the city, local residents, especially those in less-affluent localities, take a contrasting attitude in the code choice of shop signs. Under the influence of globalisation, English is the global language of international communication (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006). Nonetheless, in the less-affluent areas of China, the use of English in public signage is still rather restricted. If the degree of

English use were to be adopted to evaluate the degree of internationalisation, clearly the research site would not meet the authoritative expectations of the city.

The imbalanced use of Chinese and English on shop signs may discourage local authorities from polishing the image of Zhanjiang for international investments, but the forms of Romanised scripts adopted in the research area could implicitly bring some good news. Previous research indicates that *Hanyu pinyin* takes the place of English to present a foreign-like look and fit in with the actors' low English literacy level in less-affluent areas (Han & Wu, 2020). The present study, however, argues that even in less-affluent areas, English, the preferred Romanised system, can be more frequently visible on shop signs, either in English words alone or in combination with *Hanyu pinyin*, with Roman letters or with both. English, though playing a peripheral and symbolic role, is the connotation of prestige, modernity, globalisation and internationalisation (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Jaworski & Yeung, 2010; Tan & Tan, 2015). The strong presence of English is often found in brand names. It is thus believed that local shop owners are becoming aware of the practical value associated with the language. The fragmentary information given in English on shop signs is deployed to either exoticise the goods sold in the shops or follow the fashion of using foreign names, which projects an image of high quality and eventually brings commercial benefits. In the wrestling between English and *Hanyu pinyin*, English has won the favour of private sign makers because of the economic value attached to it. Even though sign owners have little knowledge of English, it does not stop English from entering public life and being the most competitive Romanised system in the arena of public signage (Tan & Tan, 2015). Compared to *Hanyu pinyin*, English being a more exotic script without Chinese characteristics can better propel the shops to a higher social status.

Linguistic resources can be used appropriately to boost the image of a place (Han & Wu, 2020). In an era of economic globalisation, cities are striving for economic development by presenting a new image to the world. Thus local government could utilise linguistic resources to build charm and forge an identity of investment-friendliness. Just like most LL studies conducted in China, the research again shows the salient role that Chinese plays in social context. The predominance of Chinese on shop signs may suggest the divergence between authoritative initiatives for internationalisation and the actual approach adopted by local businessmen for commercial convenience. Yet evidence regarding the choice of Romanised systems may indicate that changes have begun to take place due to English expansion in less-affluent areas of non-English speaking countries. Grassroots individuals are making efforts to manifest their awareness of economic globalisation by using English rather than *Hanyu pinyin* in making bilingual signs. Therefore, such efforts still converge with the city's overall blueprint for economic and social development.

LL research provides a window to understand the language situations in a locality so that unnoticeable changes can be captured. This study has herein scrutinised the language practice on shop signs in a less-affluent street of Zhanjiang. Despite the dominant role of Chinese in language practice, the study has unfolded social actors' motivation through their preferred Romanised system. Though in

small percentages, bilingual signs with Romanised scripts manifest how local shop owners interpret internationalisation in sign design. English, as a working language for international communication, has been favoured by some local businessmen to demonstrate an image of internationalisation and high quality. English, not *Hanyu pinyin*, has entered the public arena of language competition by providing fragmentary information in order to achieve authentic exoticism and delocalisation. It is thus assumed that the competition between English and *Hanyu pinyin* for public presence has begun at non-official level.

5. Notes

<https://www.yicai.com/news/100200192.html>

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