



## Investigating Intentionality of Linguistic Landscapes from the Multilingual Commercial Signs



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### Abstract

This article examines multilingual commercial signs of 329 businesses from 3 representative department stores and malls in the major commercial districts of N China's Shanghai. By using photographs and interviews as the data sources, the article focuses on the intentionality conveyed by the commercial linguistic landscapes in terms of the intentional attitude and the intentional content. Based on data gained in this empirical research in March of 2016, it is found that there are three main categories of shop signs: monolingual (70.58%), bilingual (23.13%) and multilingual (6.29%). Results indicate that the signs in foreign languages is overabundant and that the monolingual tendency with English as a dominant language takes a proportion of 70%, while Chinese (25%) to a lower degree sees its status as a supplement for overall commercial Linguistic landscapes. It can also be concluded that most customers hold positive attitudes towards the bilingual and multilingual shop signs. They consider using foreign languages in shop signs more attractive and stylish and deem it more acceptable as it reflects a kind of internationalization. However, critical comments are evident as some respondents hold that the widespread utilization of foreign languages on shop signs heavily hinders the creation of harmonious domestic shopping environment, resulting in much inconvenience and discomfort. The research aims to provide suggestions on the planning of foreign languages use in public spaces and to promote the construction of spiritual civilization in commercial linguistic landscapes.

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## 1. Introduction

Intentionality, being a core segment in the activity of the human mind, bears epistemic significance, which can be exploited in the study of language. (Xu, 2013) As the first step in a specific mental activity and throughout the whole process, the intentionality frame, including intentional content and intentional attitude, can be regarded as a definite structure in the human mind (Consciousness and Intentionality, 2006) and this renders it rather easy to ascertain in the analysis of linguistic landscape.

Currently, the popularity of English in China is unprecedented and has been fuelled by the recent political and social development of Chinese society in the context of globalization. In the case of the largest city in China and the eighth largest city in the world—Shanghai, the foreign languages seem to be omnipresent in public spaces. Business is no exception for this so-called shopping paradise. When we walk through the shopping downtown areas there, we encounter an uncountable flood of shop signs containing the foreign linguistic data. In particular, there is hardly any situation in which the passer-by is not confronted with the foreign languages, translated, borrowed, or used as it is in business that have a kind of influence on most of everybody's aspects of daily life.

As a corollary one could assume that there is a considerable number of customers with proficient language skills in foreign languages. It might also be suggested that its visibility in shop signs has something to do with the actual business demands for their intended readers. In order to pursue this assumption, the present case study comes into sight from a synchronic analysis of commercial shop signs in the city department stores and malls in order to document the presence and status of foreign languages, to investigate if there is a discrepancy between the functions performed by foreign linguistic items on the shop signs and the overall intentional attitude and intentional content of customers towards this language situation in the commercial context.

## Literature Review

The study of shop signs as linguistic landscape (LL) has been an emerging field of applied linguistics, mainly explores the symbolic and indexical meanings of linguistic signs displayed in the material world. Shop signs can be categorised as *bottom-up signs* (Gorter, 2006), *private signs* (Ben- Rafael *et al.*, 2009, 2015) or *private texts* (Franco Rodríguez, 2009). According to Landry and Bourhis (1997: 27), shop signs reflect most saliently the linguistic reality of a particular territory.

Since the end of the 1990s, research into the LL has been enjoying growing interest in sociolinguistics (Amer & Obeidat, 2014). Researchers have analyzed shop signs from different perspectives. For instance, EI-Yasin and Mahadin (1996) study the linguistic material in 355 shop signs in Irbid (a city in north Jordan) in order to see the use of foreign elements in these signs. Al-Kharabsheh *et al.* (2008) investigate orthographic translation errors and problems in shop signs in the Jordanian public commercial environment. Trumper-Hecht (2009) investigates the linguistic landscape of Upper Nazareth, Israel, to show how the LL can be a site where identity is constructed by the two groups in the city and the “language battle” between Arabic and Hebrew which reflects the overall tension in Jewish-Arab relations. In a study conducted on the linguistic landscape of Taipei, Taiwan, Curtin (2009) shows how the LL can be a site where particular ideologies are promoted. Lanza and Woldemariam (2009) study the LL of the downtown and main shopping areas of Mekele, Ethiopia to see how the linguistic landscape is indexical of linguistic ideologies. Li. S. (2015) examines the particular features of English used in the LL of Suzhou in order to explore how English as a global language is deconstructed and reconstituted.

Shanghai, situating on the banks of the Yangtza River Delta in Eastern China, which is widely regarded as the citadel of China's modern economy and also one of the most important cultural, commercial, financial, industrial and communications centers of China, could be an excellent place for the LL research. On one hand, it provides an ideal research angle to study the internationalization of China, as its commercial fields could fulfill all the criteria of language on display in a multilingual urban setting; on the other hand, the higher visibility of various shop signs with foreign linguistic items in Shanghai provide affordances to the study of the commercial functions performed by foreign languages and the linguistic attitudes of customers, especially the acceptance towards the language situation in the commercial context.

This article can contribute to the body of the LL research emerging in China, by taking a closer look at the social cultural and economic implications of linguistic items on shop signs. Through the extensive on-the-spot investigation of people's reactions to shop signs, it is also intended to discuss the naming request and standardization of shop signs for the construction of language civilization in the current business context of China.

## 2. Research Methods

The two research questions that this paper attempts to address and give reasonable answers to are listed as follows: 1) To what extent linguistic items are presented in the shop signs of major shopping malls in Shanghai? 2) How do the customers perceive the shop signs in terms of the usage and functions of foreign languages?

The empirical case study was carried out in October of 2016. For the purpose of this study, shop signs were randomly selected from 3 representative shopping malls (Shanghai IFC Mall in Pudong district, Plaza 66 in Jin'an district, Grand Gateway in Xuhui district) in the major commercial districts of Shanghai, China. The types of business in the sample area include (but are not limited to) jewelry, boutiques (shoe shops, clothes shops), restaurants, souvenirs and gift shops, and stores for furniture and electronic appliances. Using photographs as a source of data, it focuses on the language choice in all the linguistic materials written to draw attention to a shop, whether on the main signs or on the typical side signs, including entrance areas, display boards, shop windows, etc.

“Simply identifying the languages present within a country or area in quantitative terms does not provide us with any information about the relations between the languages observed and their uses in a given place”. (Barni & Bagna, 2010: 4) Therefore, on the basis of the statistical data, an open survey by interviewing the passers-by (Aiestaran et al. 2010) has been conducted in order to know their attitudes towards foreign languages usage on the shop signs.

## 3. Results and Analysis

According to the language choice, 1081 shop signs of 329 businesses available in this research fall into three main categories: Monolingual (70.58%), Bilingual (23.13%) and Multilingual (6.29%). (See Figure 1 below)

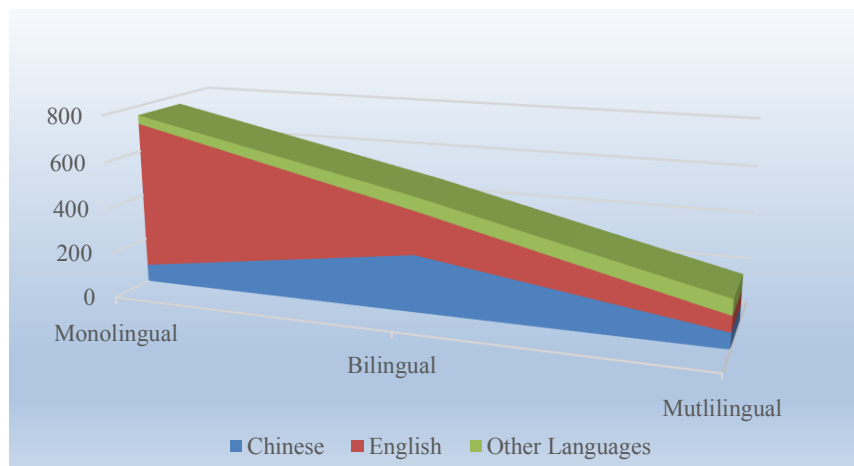


Figure 1. Language Choice for 3 categories of Shop Signs

As for the monolingual signs, English takes the dominant role with which nearly 85% of signs are shown, while Chinese and other foreign languages appear 10% and 5% respectively. The bilingual signs mainly employ either Chinese with English or Chinese with other foreign languages. And on the multilingual signs, Chinese and English appear on the top list in accordance with their frequency. In terms of the language choice, there are 903 signs with English constituting almost 83.53% of the total number of signs collected, followed by 394 signs with Chinese language and 109 signs with other languages. (See Figure 2.)



Figure 2. Snapshots of Shop Signs

Through the interviews conducted with 78 Chinese customers respectively in three shopping malls, including 30 males and 48 females, most respondents hold positive attitudes towards the bilingual and multilingual shop signs. Most females tend to consider using English and other foreign languages in shop signs more attractive and prestigious, which can ensure the high quality of the products sold or services provided in these shops. While male customers deem bilingual and multilingual shop signs more acceptable as they can reflect a kind of fashion and internationalization, catering for the metropolis status of Shanghai. Meanwhile, facing the widespread utilization of English as well as other foreign languages on monolingual shop signs, over 60% of respondents demonstrate critical comments in spite of the agreement on the important symbolic value of English in the current globalized Shanghai, China. It was asserted repeatedly that the use of only the English language as well as other foreign languages on signs brings a lot of inconvenience and makes them confused sometime; only less than 30% of respondents, most of whom are young people, consider the use of only foreign languages in signs a sign of modernity which is very functional for attracting them.

### Discussion

By examining the linguistic items on the shop signs, this article presents the actual linguistic situation of three major shopping malls in Shanghai. The presence of only English on the shop signs is the most common feature (nearly 60%) in the selected sample of the study with Chinese to a lower degree seen its status as a supplement. In addition, Chinese in English spelling signs and Chinese *Pinyin* are often used to represent English words and phrases in the category of monolingual and bilingual signs. The reason for such representation is the fact that some more foreign languages, especially English have already been used in the local dialect of the city. By investigating the customers' attitudes towards the usage and functions of foreign languages, it can be clearly found that there is actually a discrepancy between the overall linguistic presence and the customers' expected shopping surroundings.

It should be admitted that in Shanghai, an international metropolis, major shopping malls may have their business intended not only for local citizens but also for foreigners. Whatsoever, the current penetration of English into deep strata of people's business lives reflects that Shanghai as one of the most advanced cities in China, has been heavily controlled by the global influence of English. According to Bolton (2012), English is nowadays not only of significance for regional discourses anymore, but has become a global issue. The frequent use of foreign languages in the business context indicates that these items are eventually going to be loanwords into Chinese sometime in the future as they might be more familiar to local people.

However, China is still monolingual country, notwithstanding its close economic ties with the rest of the world, particular attention should be paid to glocalisation of foreign languages and cultures and especially the prevailing English language should be regulated according to the local dialect linguistic system. From the perspective of language policy, *the Product Quality Law of the People's Republic of China* (2000) and *the National Common Language Law of the People's Republic of China* (2001) already prescribe that the public service industry in China must adopt standardized specification of Chinese characters; as a result of public

service needs, shop signs, advertisements, notices and other communal facilities could use bilingual or multilingual signage on the basic specification of standardized Chinese characters. Faced with the Complex situation and chaotic phase on the overuse of monolingual shop signs with English as well as other foreign languages, relevant administrative departments should manage to regulate these uncivilized phenomena in order to promote the standardization and rational development of the national linguistic landscapes.

#### 4. Conclusion

As was indicated in this research about the three shopping malls in Shanghai, the shop signs in foreign languages is phenomenal and that the monolingual tendency with English as a dominant language takes a proportion of 70%, while Chinese (25%) to a lower degree sees its status as a supplement for overall commercial LL. Results also indicate that most customers show their positive attitudes towards the bilingual and multilingual shop signs, but hold critical opinions about the widespread utilization of foreign languages instead of Chinese on monolingual shop signs. It can be concluded that Chinese as the only official language in China Mainland, should play the leading role in the domestic social and economic context. What's more, standardized bilingual and multilingual shop signs should also be promoted to supply more convenience to the foreigners with the aim of following the social and economic globalization.

This research could pave the way for the planning of foreign languages use in public spaces and to promote the construction of spiritual civilization in commercial linguistic landscapes. Meanwhile, it highlights the great importance to promoting the construction of spiritual civilization in commercial linguistic landscapes by providing suggestions on maintaining better domestic business environment suitable for the development of economy, society and culture. The descriptive statistic approach to the shop signs together with the surveys about the customers' linguistic attitudes in this study gains new insights and also adds value to the field of the LL research. As for the future study, it would also be interesting to do interviews among the shop-owners and the authors of the shop signs to discover their intentions and why they are using specific languages in their signs and not others. Besides that, more research is needed in similar contexts such as street signs, billboards, local newspapers and TV programs in order to depict the overall presence of lives in linguistic from different backgrounds in China.

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