Mapping the Linguistic Landscape of Kuala Lumpur

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Abstract:

Linguistic landscape (LL) refers to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region. The highest density of signs can be found in cities and towns, particularly in the main shopping streets and industrial areas. This study is a synchronic analysis of digitally photographed commercial shop signs in three selected regions of Kuala Lumpur that focuses on the patterns of the language use. Findings reveal bilingual shop signs dominated the shopping streets in the areas adjacent to and within Kuala Lumpur and English being more prevalent than the national language or other languages. There was also visibility of foreign languages that offers linguistic diversity in the cityscapes. In summary, multilingualism in the areas boils down to different languages being used and functioning in differing ways.

Keywords: *linguistic landscape, commercial shop signs, bilingual, multilingual*

Bionote

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Introduction

Today we are living in the modern world of trade and business where we are bombarded with advertisements in the form of billboards, posters, shop signs, television as well as radio advertisements. Advertisements are created to persuade people into believing that they need certain product or the product benefits them in certain way. Whatever message advertisements may convey it is achieved through careful language use and the synergistic arrangement of the language.

Walking along the shopping streets of cities of the world including the capital city of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur one would encounter a myriad of commercial shop signs which are an indirect form of advertising to attract customers. The shape, language, font type, information contained in a sign can attract customers, just like advertisements. Though we experience and observe different linguistic varieties coexist in this language artefact, we rarely take a serious note of its linguistic and informative meanings. More importantly, little attention has been paid to the effects of globalisation on signs particularly in large cosmopolitan urban areas in expanding circle country like Malaysia. Thus, this paper explores the patterns of language in commercial shop signs in three selected areas adjacent to and within Kuala Lumpur and attempts to understand the underlying motivations for such language patterns.

Literature Review

Linguistic landscape (LL hereafter) is the study of writing in the public sphere typically focused on urban environments especially in the multilingual settings. The main focus of LL studies is the use of language in its written form in the public spaces (Gorter, 2006). Most research studies approach the LL from applied linguistics, sociolinguistics or language policy perspective. As defined by Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), the artefacts for LL include 'any sign announcement located outside or inside a public institution or a private business in a given geographical location'. This concept has been expanded by encompassing other possible discourse in the public domain such as advertisement flyers, advertisement on moving vehicles, electronic flat panel displays and tourist maps.

Cities and towns are particular research sites for LL for their relative higher densities such as at the main shopping streets, commercial and industrial areas. Although LL has often been taken for granted, it is pivotal to realise that LL does not occur in a vacuum. As suggested by Laundry and Bourhis (1997), it serves informational and symbolic functions in a particular area. This is because LL 'constitutes of the scene (...) where society's public life takes place' (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006, p.8). Bolton also posits that research in LL 'may help us to understand the rapidly changing urban landscapes, and the increasingly multilingual worlds, in which we live or we experience through travel' (2012: 32).

Of late, studies on LL have caught the interest of linguists around the world. Some linguists study LL artefacts to add another perspective about societal multilingualism by focusing on language choices, hierarchies of languages, contact-phenomena, regulations and aspects of literacy. For example, Huebner's (2006) study examined language mixing and language dominance in Bangkok, Thailand. His study documents the linguistic diversity of the LL in this large metropolitan area underscoring a complete multilingual 'environmental print' of the streets. The study indicates the growing influence of English as a global language not just in the form of lexical borrowing, but also in orthography, pronunciation and syntax.

Another study by Lanza and Woldemariam (2009) on the LL of the downtown and main shopping areas of Mekele, Ethiopia echoes Huebner's findings indicating most shop signs in the areas were bilingual rather than monolingual, and English was found either as second or the only language on these signs. Both researchers concluded that English was more frequently used because of its popularity as the global language and instrumental purposes of

commodification. The presence of bilingual shop signs denote the sociolinguistic compositionin the research site and provide information as to what language can be used for communication and obtaining services within the areas.

The languages of signs could also be both a product of governmental planning and demographics as suggested by Ariffin and Husin (2013) in their study on shop sign language choice and patterns in Malaysian towns. They pointed out that language choice in signs is subjected to the Malaysian subsidiaries of the Local Council by-laws (Undang-Undang Kecil Majlis Perbandaran) and the National Language Act (Akta Bahasa Kebangsaan) that stipulate Bahasa Malaysia (BM) must be used for the public signboards and road names. Signs considered in breach of this regulation can be taken down and the business proprietors can be fined. However, they also highlighted that the use of native language and English has become a very common practice in signs. As illustrated in their study, the visibility of Mandarin increased as one approaches Cheng, compared to the other three research areas in their study where the presence of BM and English was more. The shop signs in Cheng comprised of more Mandarin orthography together with BM and English, presumably because of the significant Chinese population there.

Multilingualism is an important aspect of all these studies, and at the same time the process of globalisation is made visible through the use of English in the public sphere of the world's cities alongside the national and native languages. However, there are scant published data on shop sign language patterns in Malaysian urban sites. Thus, the present study intends to further contribute to the understanding of written languages in Malaysian urban public sphere.

The Study

This study examines the language patterns in commercial shop signs of three selected areas adjacent to and within Kuala Lumpur through the lens of LL. It focuses on the overt language practice in relation to the stated language policy for commercial shop signs and the reasons for the language choice.

Sociolinguistic profile of Malaysia and the research areas

Malaysia is a federal constitutional monarchy with 28 million people mainly made up of Malays (50.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Bumiputeras (11%), Indians (7.1%) and other unlisted ethnic groups (6.9%) (The 2010 Population and House Census of Malaysia). The constitution has decreed that BM is the official language of the country. It is the language used in administration, legislation and education. Whilst BM is advocated as the official language of the country, English is widely supported in schooling and higher education for reasons of internationalisation, modernity and development by the country and the local communities. As far as the management of the LL is concerned, the Malaysian subsidiaries of the Local Council by-laws (Undang-Undang Kecil Majlis Perbandaran) and the National Language Act (Akta Bahasa Kebangsaan) stipulate that BM should be the dominant language on public signboards, road names and commercial shop signs.

Bukit Bintang

Kuala Lumpur is the federal capital and most populous city of Malaysia. It is the economic, financial and cultural city of the country with an estimated 1.76 million people in an area of just 243km². The city is primarily a mix of Malays andBumiputeras (a term used for indigenous ethnic groups such as Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak) (45.9%), Chinese (43.2%), Indians (10.3%) and Others (1.5%) (The 2010 Population and House Census of Malaysia). It is also important to note here that in recent years apart from these ethnic groups, there are increasing foreign residents in the city accounting for about 9% of the total population. The research area for this metropolitan city covered the main shopping streets along the Bukit Bintang area as it is considered as the heart of the city.

Sentul

Sentul is a fairly large town divided into Sentul East and Sentul West. It lies just 4km north of the heart of Kuala Lumpur. Sentul was once a humble neighbourhood but now rapidly developing into a modern township. Once famous for its railway and markets, Sentul today is a hotspot for property investors as well as various young adults seeking to make a home close to Kuala Lumpur. According to the 2010 census, its locality comprises of Malays (53.5%), Chinese (20.5%), Indians (16%), non-Malaysian citizens (8%), Bumiputeras (1%) and Others (1%).

Putrajaya

Putrajaya City, officially named as Federal Territory of Putrajaya, was opened in 1995 and declared as the 3rd Federal Territory in Malaysia in 2001. Situated in the middle of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), Putrajaya is the Federal Administrative Centre of Malaysia. The prime areas in the city are divided into 20 precincts and consist of government offices, commercial, residential and recreational areas. It is a planned city with Precinct 1 as the location of governmental ministries. The whole city covers an area of 49km2 with a total population of 88,300. Out of this statistics, 83,800 are Malays, 900 are Bumiputeras, 900 are Indians, 500 are Chinese, 100 are other ethnics and 2,100 are non-Malaysian citizens (Population by States and Ethnic Groups, 2015). The population comprises mainly government servants. The research area is the commercial area of the city in Precinct 15 where most shops are located.

Data Collection and Analysis

A total of 1014 digital photographs of shop signs were collected within the three research areas. A detailed look was taken at the distribution of the languages that are used on the signs based on Sunwani's (2005) model of unilingual, bilingual and mulitilingual shop signs to denote signs that displayed either one, two, three or more than three languages irrespective of which specific language(s) was/were used. In addition, the relative prominence of the languages on the signs was also examined in terms of their sequence and size. However, any semiotic signs like icon, index and symbol found in the shop signs were not analysed as they were not within the scope of the study. Table 1 below shows the framework for analysis.

<div align="center">**Table 1: Framework for Analysis**</div>

Patterns of Language Use	Language	Examples
Unilingual - only a single language is used	BM (romanised)	Kedai Menjual Alat Pendidikan & Permainan
	BM (Jawi transliteration)	Kedai Pakaian كداي فاكايان
	English	World of Babies
	Vernacular	新寶島小食館
Bilingual -combining two languages in the same sentence -writing the main sign in one language, followed by its translation in another language	BM & English	Butik Terminal Jeans
	Bahasa Malaysia & Vernacular	Kedai Perabot Soon Lee 順利傢俬
	English & Vernacular	San Shu Gong Restaurant 三叔公餐館
Trilingual / Multilingual -three or more languages are used	BM, Vernacular & English	Era Kedai Kerinting Rambut dan Persolekan 美世紀專業美容美髮 *Unisex Beauty Centre and Cosmetic Trading* Dev's Pet Shop *Kedai Haiwan Kesayangan* தேவ் பெற ஷாப்

Language Display and Distribution in Signs

Analysis of the data reveals that language use in the shop signs in the three research areas is quite dynamic. The distribution of languages on the signs reveals diverse languages used including BM, English, Chinese, Tamil, Arabic, Thai, Italian, Lebanese, Korean and Hindustani. Further analysis of the data shows 50% (n = 508) were bilingual, 31% (n = 315) were unilingual displaying only one language while 19% (n = 201) were trilingual/multilingual displaying three to four languages as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Trends of Language Patterns in the Three Research Areas
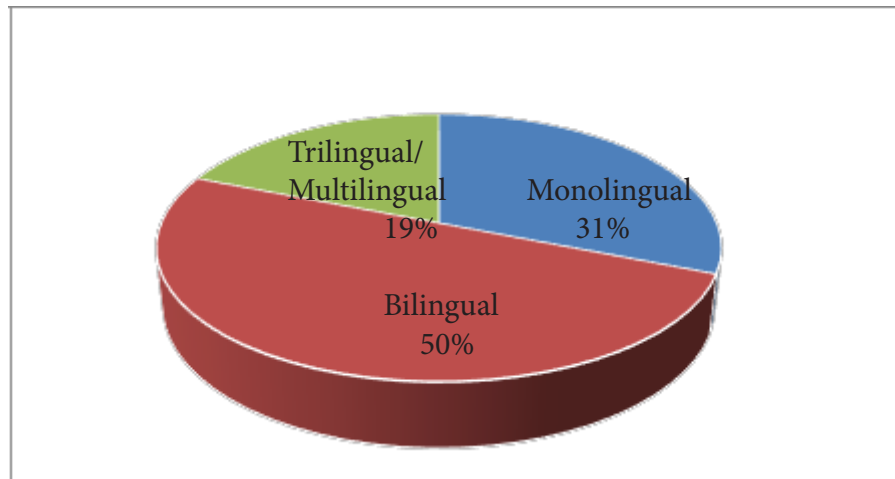
In view of the bilingual signs, it was found that 39% were English-BM, 32% were BM-English, 8% English-Chinese, 6% English-Arabic, 5% BM-Tamil, 3% Korean-BM, BM-Thai 2%, BM-Chinese 2%, BM-Arabic 2% and 1% Chinese-English. The data clearly refute the official rules and procedures concerning signs laid down by The National Language in Advertisements Confirmation Procedure (Tatacara Pengesahan Bahasa dalam Iklan) which stresses the eminence of the national language. The regulation states requisite conditions with regard to the languages contained in signs, their size and arrangement: it is compulsory to use BM, the size of BM must be 30% larger than that of other languages and BM should appear first in the sequence of languages used. Figure 2 is an example of policy non-compliance in which the English font size is clearly bigger than BM which gives prominence to English rather than BM.

Figure 2: English-BM Bilingualsigns

A similar disagreement between official language policy and linguistic realities has also been observed by Anuarudin et al. (2013) in their research of public and private billboards in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The results of their survey pointed out non-compliance to language policy and the much higher tolerance towards English. This asserts Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) assumption of language use among sign writers who 'prefer to writ[e] signs in the language(s) that intended readers are assumed to read'. English visibility can be the result of its status as the international lingua franca and tourist language par excellence. This implies a more functional use of English as the intentional means of communication in transactions directed at an English-proficient tourists (Eckert, 2006). Since the selected research areas are highly frequented by international tourists as shopping spots and tourist destinations, English was more favoured than BM.

Additionally, the data show proprietors preferred using unilingual signs (31%) with most unilingual signs (63%) in the research areas were in BM followed by English (23%), Chinese (10%) and Arabic (4%). This was aligned to Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) assumption that shop sign writers 'prefer to write signs in (their) own language or in a language with which [they] wish to be identified'. Writing in BM is then a means to assert identity, to claim existence by physically marking and asserting a claim of ownership over the landscape (Spolsky and Cooper 1991), while it also clearly presupposes and selects a readership proficient in BM. It also shows compliance to the prescribed language act to emphasise on BM supremacy. This affirms that the policy makers have succeeded in achieving the symbolic status of BM vis-à-vis other languages in the LL scenario. Interestingly, a high degree of English-only signs were most visible in the Bukit Bintang and Sentul landscapes. English signs by shops such as 'Black Forest German Restaurant and Bar' and 'Swiss Polo Travel Luggage' (FINE DINING and QUALITY LUGGAGE, respectively) exemplify the symbolic use of English as a means to invoke international allure and prominence. Thus, English in Bukit Bintang and Sentul's LLs can be said connected to 'language fetishisation' (Kelly-Holmes 2000) as 'a general symbol of modernity, progress and globalisation' (Piller, 2003: 175). Similar observations about the symbolic value of English in LLs have been made by Kasanga (2012), Backhaus (2006) and Huebner (2006) amongst others.

Figure 3: BM Unilingualism
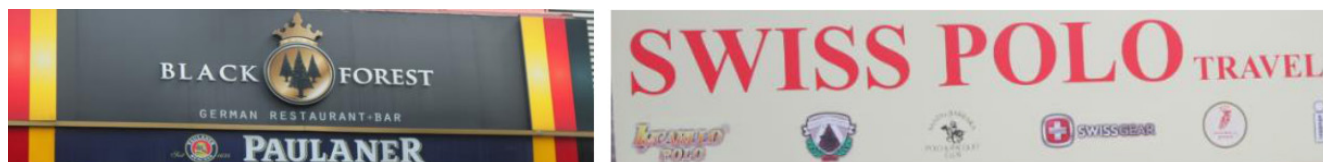
Other Languages

Other languages like Arabic, Lebanese, Italian and Thai were found as additional languages displayed on the shop fronts in the three research areas which is an indicator of transnational mobility and globalisation. The display of the other languages was found more frequent in Bukit Bintang area as more foreign tourists in general and Middle Eastern tourists in particular travel to this side of Malaysia and settle down temporarily or permanently. Interestingly, Arabic only signs were found to be more frequently displayed in the Bukit Bintang area which can also index local claims of presence, existence and vitality. These Arabic signs are directed to Arabic-speaking readers only as there are a growing number of Arabic speaking tourists and communities in Bukit Bintang. They were intended to invoke an air of authenticity, a selling strategy based on the exotic element translocally linked to the Arab identity and culture, but exerted within the Bukit Bintang locality. For example, Arabic restaurant 'Al Basha' contains no translation of the Arab dishes can be discerned as the commodification of ethnicity which targets tourists and urbanites as clientele by selling and flaunting 'ethnic authenticity' (Pang, 2012). Similar observation regarding the commodified display of ethnicity and the ethnic language as a 'floating signifier [...] used to signify, or to sell, not just things [ethnic] anything at all was made by Leeman and Modan (2009, 353–354) in Chinatown, Washington DC.

Figure 4: Other Language(s) Signs

Conclusion

This is a first survey to document the language situation in three selected areas of Kuala Lumpur. The data show that the city and the adjacent areas are moving towards bilingualism. The increased use of English in public spaces in the research areas may be seen as the instantiation of processes related to economic activities and globalisation. The results corroborate the important assumption that bilingualism and the choice of the language(s) in the street signs is an individual and a social preference. Therefore, understanding individuals' linguistic preference structures is preliminary to the target and design of proper linguistic and social policies. The study also shows that BM dominates the landscape as it is the official language and widely understood language to convey information about product or service. On one hand, the rise of Arabic is also noted in Bukit Bintang area. Hence, the rise of Arabic only signs can be seen as a threat to the harmony in language policy and the actual practice. The outcome of the study suggests language control and language planning have been undermined by the global flows of people, thus documenting the changes at each state of the linguistic situation is of great importance to the research of LL in the future.

Acknowledgement

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