

Language Choice and Language Functions of Official Signs: a Linguistic Landscape Study of Zhanjiang, China

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Abstract: The visibility of languages in public space not only tells the ethno linguistic constitution of a given region, but is also an important parameter to understand government voices. With first-hand data, this study focuses on the linguistic landscape (LL) of Zhanjiang by scrutinising the language choice and language functions of official signs. The findings show that Chinese is in a dominant position and serves as an information giver. The salience of Chinese on official signs reinforces the power of the official language in China. Foreign languages on official signs perform a symbolic function because of the economic values these languages represent. English, as a most preferred foreign code, marks modernity and internationalisation of a city, while French and Korean languages deliver a government message regarding the transformation of local economic structure. The findings suggest that official signage is not simply a reflection of how language policies of a country have been implemented in public space, but also a gateway to understanding the mode that a given region adopts for economic growth and social development.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, LL has become a research interest in sociolinguistic and applied linguistic studies. The research foci of LL studies are languages on public signs, including road signs, advertising billboards, shop signs, etc., which present a live picture of actual language use in a given geographic area [1]. As a distinctive marker of language boundaries, signs function as an information giver and embody the strength, social identity and value of a certain language [1]. So far, LL studies have been carried out from various perspectives including the linguistic features of public signs [2, 3], the gap in the implementation of language policy [4], the role of English in globalisation [5, 6], and the status of languages in bilingual/multilingual contexts [4, 5, 6].

In China, quantitative studies have been conducted to scrutinise the LL in metropolises [7, 8, 9] and multiethnic regions [10, 11]. Despite a large quantity, many studies in China only scratch the surface of LL such as linguistic features of Chinese language, regulation of Chinese characters and inaccuracy of English translation on signs. Some studies discuss the language power associated with language functions in public signage [10, 11], but very often the discussion fails to provide detailed interpretation of language choice on official signs. It seems that research interest is mostly placed on nonofficial signs because these signs display a more linguistically vivid picture of language preference, and mirror the gap in the implementation of language policy. Official signs, on the other hand, appear to be less attractive and less creative as they are a standardised model of national language law. Moreover, when it comes to the minority languages displayed on signs, many studies simply refer this phenomenon to the symbolic functions of language or the small percentage of ethnographic constitution without further explanation. The languages, especially minority ones, chosen for official signs are not results of random practice, even when these sometimes hardly indicate any ethnographic minorities in a given community. In fact, economic factors such as use value and instrumental rationality often contribute to the formation of LL in a given region [12]. Although Shang [12] argued that economic payoff was the major concern in nonofficial proprietors, this could also be the motivation of language choice by official sectors. In other words, the

languages shown on official signs not only unfold the supremacy of a certain language, but also reflect policies adopted by local governments for economic benefits. China is now the second largest economy in the world. Given such a global context, many emerging cities in China are now seizing opportunities for economic development with accessible and available resources. The research on official signs in such cities could provide some insight into the localised modes that these cities adopt for economic growth.

Taking the above concerns together, the present study chose the French Style Street, a historic heritage street in Zhanjiang, as the research subject with an attempt to understand the language choice in official signage. The paper intends to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the languages displayed on official signs?
- (2) Which language(s) is(are) playing a prominent role in official signage?
- (3) What are the factors that contribute to such a language choice?

2. Zhanjiang in Contexts

Located in the southwest of Guangdong Province, Zhanjiang is a coastal city connecting Guangdong, Guangxi and Hainan provinces. Due to its unique geographic position, the city was leased to France in 1899 and renamed Fort Bayard by the French. The region was reintegrated into China in 1945.

As a city of geographic importance, Zhanjiang was designated an open coastal city in 1984 to deepen the economic reform in China. International trade then began and gradually local economy thrived. In 2013, the local government for the first time officially proposed internationalising the city for business, a plan that followed the establishment of Zhanjiang Iron and Steel (ZJIS) and the determination to transform local economic structure. The awareness of further economic development was heightened in 2014 when the city was listed as one of the 15 key pivot Chinese cities in the Belt and Road Initiative to play a strategic role in international cooperation. Until now, great work has been done to promote the city's tourism, heavy industry and marine industry. Among international business partners, the Korean Pohang Iron and Steel Corporation (POSCO) and the German BASF SE are playing a leading role especially in technical exchange.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Research Site

The research site in the present study is the French Style Street in downtown Zhanjiang with a length of approximately 800m. The name of the street is linked to its history as this area was administrated by the French between 1899 and 1945. To preserve heritage resources and boost tourism, the local government renovated the street in 2014. It is now a city landmark as a conflation of historic heritage, tourist sites, restaurants, shops and public service.

3.2 Data Collection and Processing

Despite assorted LL research conducted at home and abroad, a fundamental concept that has yet to be universally defined is the constitution of analysis unit [13]. Considering the research aims, the analysis unit in current study followed the notion established by Backhaus [2], that is, any piece of written text was considered a sign and thus counted as one item, regardless of its size and the amount of information. To ensure sign representation, the study excluded signs that are non-stationary, visually unclear or have no texts [7].

Taking the notions proposed by previous LL studies [1, 3, 5, 7], the present study defined street names, road signs, government notices and public signs created and issued by government as official signs. In total, 108 official signs were identified. These signs were analysed according to the number and prominence of languages. For the prominence of languages on signs, the study employed the method adopted by Cenoz and Gorter [4], viz, it was defined by the amount of information given. The more information a language presents, the more importance has been attached to it.

4. Research Results

4.1 The Number of Languages on Official Signs

In light of the number of languages, three broad categories were identified, namely monolingual, bilingual and trilingual (Table 1). The study adopted the conventional definitions of the three terms, that is, the number of languages defines the types of signs regardless of the languages displayed.

Table 1 Number of languages on official signs

	Monolingual	Bilingual	Trilingual	Total
Number	74	32	3	109
Percentage	67.9%	29.35%	2.75%	100%

As can be seen, monolingual sign units were dominant in official signage, accounting for 67.9%, over two times the bilingual official signs (Fig. 1). The percentage of trilingual signs was rather low, indicating that using more than two languages on official signs was not common practice in Zhanjiang. Such a result could be understandable as the practice might lead to cost increase and awkwardness of presentation style [6].



Fig. 1 A bilingual official sign



Fig. 2 A trilingual road sign

4.2 Languages Displayed on Official Signs

In current study, no further distinction was made between traditional Chinese and simplified Chinese. Both script forms were counted as Chinese. Besides, romanisation of Chinese texts, namely Chinese pinyin, was read as English. In total, four languages were identified, i.e. Chinese, English, Korean and French, which formed different displaying patterns on official signs (Table 2).

Table 2 Languages presented on official signs

	Chinese only	Chinese-English	Chinese-French	Chinese-English-Korean	Total
Number	74	29	3	3	109
Percentage	67.9%	26.6%	2.75%	2.75%	100%

Table 1 and Table 2 show great similarity in percentage distribution. On monolingual signs, Chinese was the only language displayed. Considering the large number of Chinese residents in Zhanjiang, the common use of Chinese on monolingual signs was predictable. The bilingual official signs split into Chinese-English and Chinese-French language pairs. Compared to French, English was a preferred code when it comes to the choice of foreign language (26.6%). The small percentage of trilingual signs displayed a rare and distinctive Chinese-English-Korean pattern. The two rare code combinations were presented on bronze statues as tourist information (Chinese-French, Fig. 3) and street signs with traffic information (Chinese-English-Korean, Fig. 2).



Fig. 3 A Chinese-French sign



Fig. 4 A bilingual sign with equal amount of information

4.3 Language Preference on Non-monolingual Signs

Although Chinese monolingual signs constituted the overwhelming majority of official signage, it would be interesting to investigate the dominant language on bilingual and trilingual signs to reveal local authorities' language preference. As was mentioned previously, the method employed was the amount of information given in each language. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Amount of information on bilingual and trilingual signs

	Same in all languages	More in Chinese	More in English	More in French	More in Korean	Total
Number	8	26	1	-	-	35
Percentage	22.85%	74.3%	2.85%	-	-	100%

Table 3 again clearly presents the prominent role that Chinese plays in official LL. Mutual translation was uncommon except on signs pertaining to tourist information (22.85%, Fig. 3, Fig. 4). As the dominant language, Chinese provided more extensive and detailed information to recipients in public space, over 74% of the non-monolingual signs (Fig. 1, Fig. 2). On these signs, translation took place mostly on key information such as the name of organisations and roads.

5. Discussion

5.1 Functions of Chinese and English on Official Signs

As was presented previously, Chinese played a dominant role in public space, which was the only language used on most official signs. On non-monolingual signs, Chinese always accompanied foreign languages in public signage since it was the one providing practical information. It once again shows local compliance with both national and provincial language laws, that is, foreign languages should be always supplemented by standardised Chinese in public space [9]. Within a territory, communication and services are achieved by the dominant language, and thus the language serves an informational function in public space [1]. Considering the overwhelming power

and high visibility of Chinese, the language is apparently functioning as a key carrier of information in Zhanjiang public space. The prevalence of Chinese clearly declares the power of Chinese as official language, which confirms the successful promotion of standardised Chinese in China. It demonstrates the salient position of Chinese in official signage, and asserts the predominant strength of Chinese ethnic group in a city where economic transformation is in progress.

A language performs symbolic functions when it becomes a salient dimension to demonstrate its value, status, social identity and power [1]. Among the identified foreign languages, English played a more vibrant role in Zhanjiang public space. English is now the de facto lingua franca in global communication and its economic value has brought the language high status as a symbol of internationalisation [5, 6]. The *Report on the Work of Zhanjiang Government* since 2013 began to emphasise internationalising the city for business in order to attract more foreign investment. In the era of globalisation, English undoubtedly fulfils the role. Signs with English in the research site were in relation to tourism, transportation and public service, which might be the first step taken by the local government to purposefully build an international image for the city. Nonetheless, English simply functions as a decorative code because key information is still given in Chinese. In other words, English serves a symbolic function to demonstrate an impression of internationalisation in public space.

5.2 The Foci of Economic Development Revealed by Languages of Minor Proportion

Traditionally very few LL studies in China take languages of minor proportion into discussion, as they are often considered statistically insignificant. However, insignificant items in fact demonstrate momentous change and demarcate a space [14]. In present study, that French and Korean entered public space is not unconscious practice, but an intentional sign emplacement suggesting local economic plans. Similar to English, French and Korean perform symbolic functions, considering the message recipients and the amount of practical information provided.

French on official signs was only found on bronze statues as tourist attractions. The symbolic function that French plays is rather different from that of English, which reflects the implementation of local economic plans. Since language is one of the most identifiable markers associated with distinct ethnic groups [15], language and physical objects together form a multimodal context to indicate a certain cultural identity. In the case of Zhanjiang, the cultural and historical identity of the research site is constructed via tangible heritage and reinforced by linguistic authenticity, a move directed by the local government to boost tourism. Under this circumstance, French becomes part of tourist assets to illustrate cultural exoticism and historical authenticity of the site.

The Korean language in official signage was mostly found on traffic signs of main roads. One may find this awkward since Zhanjiang is never a popular inhabitation of Korea communities. Yet such practice may be closely linked to the economic plans to boost heavy industry of the city. Ever since the establishment of ZJIS, great importance has been attached to the progress of iron and steel industry so that the local mode of economic growth is underpinned by heavy industry. To fulfil economic goals, the local government has been seeking international cooperation for technical exchange. POSCO began to play a referential role for green metal production when the city established friendly relationship with Pohang, South Korea. At the same time, the two cities have witnessed frequent visits for cultural and educational exchanges. The Korean language on official signs thus creates linguistic familiarity and friendliness for Korean guest recipients, and forms a positive attitude towards the city [16]. The language chosen in this case serves an economic purpose [11] to maintain a friendly relationship with Pohang, attract Korean investors and fulfil economic goals of the city.

6. Conclusion

The LL in a region may not truly tell the ethnographic constitution of the surveyed area, but can be resources manipulated by individuals and institutions for social purposes [5]. The present study has herein closely examined official signs in public space of Zhanjiang and discussed the messages delivered by the languages chosen on signs. With reference to the research questions, research

results indicate the predominant role that Chinese plays on the vast majority in public signage. Monolingual signs in Chinese are mostly favoured by the local government. Besides, Chinese is the only accompanying language on non-monolingual signs to provide the most detailed information. The findings confirm the authoritative status and informational function of Chinese in the social context of China. Three foreign languages performing symbolic functions have been identified from non-monolingual signs. English is the salient one that occupies a large percentage. As a de facto global language for international communication, English is favoured by the city as a symbol of modernity and internationalisation. It helps build an international image of the city. The use of French in public signage brings cultural exoticism and historical authenticity to recipients. The language thus becomes an important tourist asset to promote local tourism. The function of Korean language on official signs has also been interpreted from an economic perspective. The intentional use of Korean language on official traffic signs may indicate the strong will of the local government to boost heavy industry via technical and cultural exchange with South Korea. Apparently language use in public space is not random practice, but a manipulated behaviour revealing authoritative voices. The use of English, French and Korean may serve different economic purposes, yet the ultimate goal remains the same, that is, to further develop local economy and transform economic structure. This paper may provide future researchers with a different dimension to interpret the preference for foreign language on official signs, a dimension that language choice in China could be a reflection of the mode that a given region adopts for economic growth and social development.

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