

Signs in the linguistic landscape as markers of an ethnic group's identity and ownership

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Abstract

Whereas the geography of a certain area is certainly linked in many ways to the ethnic group occupying it (or who used to occupy it), the link between the land and the language/s spoken (or that used to be spoken) can only become visible through the linguistic landscape, which not only asserts identity and ownership but can also help to reinforce prestige and vitality of the languages employed. The problem is that if the local heritage language is a minority or regional one, only in few cases can it be used to affirm the identity and ownership of its speakers. There are two *sine qua non* conditions for the local language to appear in the linguistic landscape: 1) The language must have gone beyond the 'threshold of literacy', i.e. it must have developed as a written language, with its own orthography and literature; 2) The language must be allowed to be used in the linguistic landscape and/or enjoy a degree of official recognition. This article presents five case studies on the presence of local minority/regional languages in the linguistic landscape based on the author's research: two in Italy (Udine and Milan) and two in Southeast Asia (Kuala Lumpur and Bandar Seri Begawan, the capitals of Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam respectively). The very interesting situation in Macao will also be touched on, where the colonial language, Portuguese, has been given prominence in the linguistic landscape in spite of the fact that only a tiny percentage of the population can speak it. In this case, Portuguese is portrayed as a kind of heritage language (as well as an international language) that does not need to be mastered as its main function is symbolic, i.e. to help Macao retain its special status as a Special Administration Region of China.

Keywords: Brunei Darussalam, Italy, linguistic landscape, Macao, Malaysia, regional/minority languages, 'threshold of literacy'.

Introduction

Whereas the geography (including architecture) of a certain area is certainly linked in many ways to the ethnic group occupying it (or who used to occupy it), the link between the land and the language/s spoken (or that used to be spoken) can only become visible through the linguistic landscape, which not only asserts identity and ownership but can also help to reinforce prestige and vitality of the

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languages employed. This link between language and territory which can be reinforced through the use of the local language in the linguistic landscape, can be seen as an example of the ideology of language-and-territory as defined by Myhill (1999). The problem is that if the local heritage language is a minority or regional one, only in few cases can it be used to affirm the identity and ownership of its speakers. There is two *sine qua non*-conditions for the local language to appear in the linguistic landscape: 1) The language must have gone beyond the 'threshold of literacy', i.e. it must have developed as a written language, with its own orthography and literature (see Coluzzi, 2012a); 2) The language must be allowed to be used in the linguistic landscape and/or enjoy a degree of official recognition.

To prove the point, this paper presents five case studies based on the research on the presence of local minority/regional languages in the linguistic landscape in two Italian cities (Udine and Milan) and two Southeast Asian countries (Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, with a focus on their capitals, Kuala Lumpur and Bandar Seri Begawan respectively). The very interesting situation in Macao will also be touched on, where the colonial language, Portuguese, has been given prominence in the linguistic landscape in spite of the fact that only a tiny percentage of the population can speak it.

Apart from the one carried out by the author and focused upon in this article, relatively little research has been published to date on the presence of minority/regional languages in the linguistic landscape of the four countries looked at in this article. As far as Italy is concerned, articles have been published on the presence of German varieties in South Tyrol and Piedmont (Plank, 2006; Dal Negro, 2009), of Slovene in Friuli Venezia Giulia (Tufi, 2013; Blackwood & Tufi, 2015; Mezgec, 2016), and of various regional languages in different Italian coastal cities (Blackwood & Tufi, 2012 and 2015) and on-road signs in Northern Italy (Puzey, 2012). As for Malaysia, most of the published research so far has concentrated on Kuala Lumpur, the capital, and its surrounding area, looking at Malay and English, but also at minority languages, particularly Chinese and Tamil (Syed Abdul Manan et al., 2014; David & Syed Abdul Manan, 2015; Supramani et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2016 and 2017; Wang & Xu, 2018). With regard to Brunei, only one article on the linguistic landscape has been published to date (Susilawati Japri, 2016). Finally, as for Macao, three articles are available on the visibility of Chinese, English and Portuguese (Neves, 2016a and 2016b; Radwańska-Williams, 2018), the latter being one of the few minority languages dealt with in this article that enjoys an official status (the others being German, Slovene, Friulian and Sardinian in Italy, all recognized minority languages). Interestingly, the results provided by most of this research, whether published before or after the author's research, seem to corroborate those arrived at in his own articles.

Italy

Udine

Friulian, the Romance minority language spoken by about half a million people in the autonomous region of Friuli Venezia Giulia in north-east Italy, enjoys official status as a minority language in Italy and possesses a standard variety with an official orthography (see Coluzzi, 2007). In spite of this, its presence in the linguistic landscape is scarce. The research carried out in 2008 (Coluzzi, 2009) in one major street in the city of Udine (Via Aquilea), the second largest town in the region and the ‘capital’ of the Friulian speaking area, showed a very limited number of signs displaying this language.

Two hundred units of analysis were recorded in Via Aquilea (Coluzzi, 2009). 172 (86%) of them were in Italian only, 25 (12.5%) contained one or more other languages in addition to Italian, and 3 (1.5%) were monolingual in English.

As for the languages employed in the multilingual signs, in 22 cases out of the 25 where one or more languages were present in addition to Italian, this language was English (88%), in 3 cases it was French (12%), in 2 it was German (8%), whereas Slovenian, Croatian and an unidentified Indian language appeared only in one unit each (4%). In 4 cases, only it was Friulian (16%).



Table 1. Signs in Udine.

	Via Aquilea (Udin/Udine)
Units in Italian only	172 86%
Units containing another language with or without Italian	28 14%
Units displaying at least one sign in Friulian	4 16%

Figure 1. Sign in Friulian: ‘Jo o feveli furlan’ (I speak Friulian).

Milan

Milan is the second-largest city in Italy and the administrative centre of the Lombardy region. The heritage language of Lombardy and some bordering areas, which include Canton Ticino in Switzerland, is Lombard, a Romance regional language that has not been recognized yet by the Italian state and only enjoys very limited protection granted by a recent regional law (Coluzzi, Brasca, Trizzino & Scuri, 2018). It’s been calculated that about 3.5 million people speak one of the Lombard varieties. Even though a unified orthography is available

now (Scriver Lombard), various orthographies are being used to write the different Lombard varieties, and sometimes even the same variety. Some of these orthographies have been in use for a long time, to write mainly poetry, but also other genres (Coluzzi, Brasca & Miola, 2019).

One hundred eighty-eight units of analysis were counted in Via S. Gottardo (Coluzzi, 2009). 143 (76%) of them were in Italian only, 41 (21.8%) contained one or more other languages in addition to Italian, and only 4 (2.1%) were monolingual in another language that was not Italian, in this specific case in English.

As for the languages employed in the multilingual signs, in 40 cases out of the 41 where one or more languages were present in addition to Italian, this language was English (97.5%), in 4 cases it was French (9.7%), in 2 it was German (4.8%), whereas Milanese, the local Lombard variety – in the same way as Turkish, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek and even Latin – appeared only in one unit of analysis (2.4%).

Table 2. Signs in Milan.

	Via S. Gottardo (Milan)
Units in Italian only	143 76%
Units containing another language with or without Italian	45 24%
Units displaying at least one sign in Lombard	1 2.4%



Figure 2. A sign in Lombard, Milanese variety: ‘Se parla anca el Milanese’ (Milanese is also spoken).

Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur)

In spite of being a very linguistically diverse country featuring around 140 languages, most of which are still quite vital (Ethnologue, 2018; Coluzzi, 2017), in most cases, only three languages are quite visible in the Malaysian linguistic landscape: first of all Malay, the national language, and English, and secondarily Chinese on enterprises belonging to Chinese owners. Tamil, too, can be found in the linguistic landscape, but less frequently. By law Malay has to appear prominently even on the signs of private enterprises (even though this is not always implemented, see Syed Abdul Manan et al., 2014), whereas English also enjoys high visibility as a prestigious international language and Malaysia's second language. Chinese is the only minority language in Malaysia that is quite ubiquitous, at least in Kuala Lumpur, along the Western coast of peninsular Malaysia and in Malaysian Borneo. Tamil, normally written using its traditional script, is most visible in the various Indian neighbourhoods (‘Little India’) that can be found in most cities along the Western coast. Malay

normally appears written in Roman characters, but the old Arabic-derived script known as Jawi is still occasionally used. Its use is actually compulsory for shop signs in the north-eastern states of Kelantan and Terengganu (Coluzzi, 2020). What is rather peculiar about Malay is that it seems to enjoy rather low prestige among the large non-Malay minority, to the point that this tends to make minimal use of it in the linguistic landscape of ‘private’ places that are not regulated by law, such as the places of worship.

In fact, within places of worship attended exclusively or almost exclusively by one ethnic group (such as Chinese Taoist, Hindu or Sikh temples) the use of the ethnic language (often in combination with English) dominates and clearly marks the space ethnically (Coluzzi & Kitade, 2015). As far as Chinese is concerned, it is normally written in Chinese characters, but names are often Romanised, partly to highlight the ethnic origin of the shop owner, which is in most cases Cantonese or Hokkien. It is the size of the Chinese and Tamil communities, the fact that both Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil are important literary languages that enjoy official status respectively in China, Taiwan and Singapore, and in Tamil Nadu (India), Sri Lanka and Singapore, and the high literacy rates in these languages of most Malaysian Chinese and Tamils (due to the presence of national-type Chinese and Tamil schools) that have contributed to these languages enjoying such visibility. Apart from a few exceptions, all the other minority languages, including some that are quite widely spoken, such as

Iban in Sarawak or Kadazandusun in Sabah, are virtually invisible. This is sometimes due to lack of standardization (lack of a recognized orthography), limited literary use, absence (or in a few cases very limited presence) in education, and/or the low prestige they enjoy.



Figure 3. Trilingual sign in Petaling Jaya (Malay, Chinese and English).



Figure 4. Chinese writings in Sam Kow Tong Chinese temple in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur.

Brunei (Bandar Seri Begawan)

In spite of its small size, Brunei is a very diverse country, even though the government’s homogenizing policies have made standard Malay overwhelmingly present in the linguistic landscape, even though it is virtually nobody’s first language (Coluzzi, 2011). Here, too, English, in spite of not

enjoying any official status, is as visible as the national language. In fact, 63 out of the 102 units of analysis examined along Jalan Sultan in the capital Bandar Seri Begawan in 2009, showcased standard Malay, written in Roman characters and/or Jawi, whose use in the linguistic landscape is compulsory in Brunei; English, on the other hand, was found in as many as 64 units of analysis. The only minority language found in the capital's linguistic landscape was Chinese, which appeared in 19 units of analysis; however, as new signs in Chinese have been outlawed, the presence of Chinese is expected to shrink over time (Coluzzi, 2012a, 2012b and 2016).

Table 3. Signs in Bandar Seri Begawan.

Language	Units
Standard Malay	63 61.7%
English	64 62.7%
Chinese	19 18.6%
Other languages	4 3.9%



Figure 5. Bilingual sign in Bandar Seri Begawan (Malay in Jawi and English).



Figure 6. A multilingual sign in Bandar Seri Begawan (Malay in Jawi, Malay in Rumi, Chinese and English).

Macao

Macao is a former Portuguese colony on China's southern coast, now a special administrative region in the People's Republic that enjoys a high degree of autonomy. Macao's case is very interesting. Whereas Malaysia and Brunei feature many language minorities, some of them very large such as the Chinese, but their languages are either totally invisible or only appear on some bottom-up units of analysis, in Macao a language that is spoken by a tiny percentage of the population, Portuguese (4022 individuals in 2011, i.e. 0.74% of the total population, Neves, 2016, p. 45), enjoys an overwhelming official presence in the country. According to my own research carried out in Largo do Senado, the main central square, in 2016, most of the 56 units of analysis recorded showcased Chinese, Portuguese and English. Forty-seven units of analysis had signs in Chinese, 37 in Portuguese, 31 in English and only 1 in another language.

Table 4. Signs in Macao.

Language	Units
Chinese	47 83.9%
Portuguese	37 66%
English	31 55.3%
Other (Italian)	1 1.7%

Macao's government is spending a considerable amount of its budget to guarantee this Portuguese image to the region, without neglecting English, though, which, being both a prestigious international language and one of Hong Kong's official languages, is not relegated to bottom-up signs. And this is done mainly for symbolical purposes, to help Macao retain a distinct identity from the mainland and, therefore its autonomy (Neves, 2016a and 2016b).



Figure 7. Bilingual writing in Macao (Chinese and Portuguese).

Figure 8. Trilingual sign in Macao (Chinese, Portuguese and English).



Discussion

As the case studies discussed in this article show, the visibility of local minority languages in all the places surveyed is minimal or null. Minimal, when the language has been developed, at least to an extent, with an accepted orthography and some literature, and/or when the language is recognized and protected by law. Null, when the language does not even have an accepted orthography and is not recognized as a minority language. Chinese (and partially Tamil in Malaysia) is an exception. It is a vital widespread language, official in China, Taiwan and Singapore. Even though it does not enjoy official recognition in Brunei and Malaysia, most Chinese in these countries attend Chinese schools and can enjoy a wide array of media in Mandarin (and even in Cantonese and sometimes in Hokkien) (see Coluzzi, 2011 and 2017b). It is a sort of 'majority-minority language, whose presence in the linguistic landscape marks the presence of ethnic Chinese and their own territory, even though this might be limited to one neighbourhood in a city or even one shop or temple. This, unfortunately, does not happen with other minority languages, even those that have been recognized as co-official such as Friulian or Slovene in Italy. One can travel through Udine or Milan without even realizing that the local heritage language is not Italian. The local linguistic landscape sends a very clear message

– these cities and their inhabitants are Italian, not even Italian and Friulian, or Italian and Lombard, just Italian. To external eyes, the local minorities do not have a territory. Therefore they do not exist.

As for Malaysia or Brunei, the autochthonous language minorities do not have a space that other people could recognize as belonging to them – the non-Chinese or non-Indian are just lumped together as Malaysians, and, if they are Muslim, even as Malay. A tourist travelling through Malaysia, in fact, would mainly see signs in Malay, Chinese or occasionally Tamil in addition to English, which would lead to the idea that Malaysian territory only belongs to the Malay, Chinese and Indian with English as a sort of lingua franca; on the other hand, the same tourist travelling in Brunei would see the country not only as Malay but also as Muslim thanks to the ubiquity of Jawi. By and large, nation-states want to portray only one identity (and language), the national one (see Coluzzi, 2012b). It is in a way paradoxical that these countries try subtly to repress linguistic diversity, even to the point of causing their own local languages to disappear, whereas Macao is strongly supporting a ('majority') minority language chiefly to mark Macao's identity as Cantonese-Portuguese. What most governments do not understand is that creating a strong local identity through the use of the local language in the linguistic landscape is not only a sign of respect for the local community and a chance for them to assert their own identity and ownership, but it could even contribute to tourism and trade of local products, as the local language would make the place and its products special and unique. It would be good if all linguistic minorities could mark their presence and/or territory with signs in their own language, but in order to do so, official recognition and a degree of corpus planning are necessary so that a relatively uniform orthography could be used that speakers would understand and externals could relate to the minority living in the area.

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