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Absence as Indexing Tool: Milingualism and Modernity in the Linguistic Landscape of Dalian

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have displayed the indexing value of certain language practices in linguistic landscape. The present study is intended to further explore the multilingual use of language in the linguistic landscape of Dalian and examine the way this indexing process operates in the era of globalization. Following discourse-analytic approach, the collected data, pictures of linguistic landscapes are analysed separately by the top-down regulatory & infrastructural discourse and bottom-up commercial discourse, during which the informational and symbolic value of bilingual signs are discussed in the sense of saying, doing and being. The result shows the absence of local language-Chinese and the informational function assigned to foreign scripts in public text; this absence as a narrative strategy contributes to the indexicality to modernity as well as the establishment of the socially situated identity as global and prestigious in reader's perceived space and hence achieves rescaling.

Key words: Absence, Dalian, Linguistic landscape, Modernity.

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1.0 Introduction

The nature of language has been put in a new inquiry situation because of the growing trend of globalization for it provides, according to Heller (2010), “new conditions for the production of language

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practices and forms and new challenges to current ways of thinking about language”. Therefore it is natural to approach the effect of globalization from the perspective of language by taking it as a sociolinguistic phenomenon. In this regard, there is a thriving trend to examine certain social and cultural aspects concerning globalization in a place by studying its linguistic landscape, particularly in a multilingual context (Lanza & Woldemariam, 2013), during which English, as the widely acknowledged international language is noted as “one of the most obvious markers of the process of globalization”. Blommaert (2003) argues that English can offer prestige and middle class identity to urban African and Lanza and Woldemariam (2008) promotes this indexical value to more peripheral region. This view is supported by the participant observation and direct interview with people who claim they are being “modern” by using English (Briggs, 1986; Spradley, 1979). In the localization process of English using, a localized multilingual repertoire is formed and the correspondent language ideologies need further examinations (Lanza and Woldemariam, 2013).

This study is intended to investigate how the indexical nature of the multilingual use of language operates in Dalian, the international port in northeast China. Focused on linguistic landscape which is both an individual and a collective space (Tufi & Blackwood, 2010) and hence a spatial narration, this investigation resorts to the methods of discourse analysis. Literatures about linguistic landscape and discourse analysis are recapped to establish the position of this research. The most notable is the viewpoint to take language as saying, doing and being, which is the analytical framework of this study. Then we briefly review the history and multilingual situation of Dalian which explain the narrowed field area in designing of methodology. After data analysis, a conclusion is made to summarize the identified narrative strategy in the performing of the indexical value of multilingualism and local language ideology of Dalian in face of globalized situations.

2.0 Literature Review

2.01 Linguistic Landscape

Linguistic Landscape is first used by Landry and Bourhis (1997) as “visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region”. More specifically, text in public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combine to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration (Landry and Bourhis, 1997). Sebba (2007) further expands this description by introducing “discourse in transit”, which includes public signs that are mobile or infix such as booklets, bank notes, stamps, bus tickets, posts and leaflets into a more general sense of linguistic landscape.

With its informational and symbolic functions, linguistic landscape has not only attracted substantial academic attentions in the study of sociology of language (bilingualism/multilingualism, language policy and planning, power relations, etc.), but has also developed a strand of academic inquiry in its own right. In that process, a new concern has emerged as a salient direction in the study of linguistic landscape, that is the attention to the non-linguistic elements such as visual images, nonverbal communication, architecture and the built environment, etc. which termed as “semiotic landscape” that literally reveals its multimodal and multi-semiotic nature. On that ground, the dynamic interplay of language, visual elements and other semiotic means in public signage has grown to be a studying focus (Milani, 2013). Jaworski and Thurlow, together with other scholars, incorporate spatial practices and cultural dimensions into the discussion on this interplay, especially “textual mediation or discursive construction of place and the use of space as a semiotic resource in its own right” (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010). They further point out a broader context—the extent to which these interactions are in turn shaped by the economic and political reordering of post-industrial or advanced capitalism, intense patterns of human mobility, the mediatisation of social life, and transnational flows of information, ideas and ideologies.

In addition to the expanding scope of study, there is also a concern for individual’s perception on and engagement with public signage in daily life (Leeman and Modan, 2009; Malinowski, 2009; Garvin, 2010;

Trumper-Hecht, 2010). As Tufi and Blackwood (2010) note, linguistic landscape is the “subjectivity of the viewer in the interpretation of, or response to, the sign’s meaning and connotations” (Lanza and Woldemariam, 2013). Thereby, according to Lefebvre’s theory on space study (1991), linguistic landscape is the conceived space that is the representation of space; and as a significant part of urban discourse, it provides us with rich material to understand what is actually happening in a certain space, not only in the sense of lived space (spatial practices), but also perceived space (representational space).

As Landry and Bourhis (1997) proposed, linguistic landscape is “a marker of the relative power and status of the linguistic communities inhabiting the territory”. In accordance to this argument, the concept of *scale* is introduced to sociolinguistics from history and social geography by Blommaert (2007) as a feature of meaning making in human interaction. It is a “vertical metaphor in contrast to the established horizontal tradition in sociolinguistics, like distribution, spread, flow and trajectory of language”. Scale by itself suggests that the processes of distribution and flow are accompanied by processes of hierarchical ordering, in which different phenomena are not juxtaposed, but layered and distinguished on which they operate and have value and validity (Blommaert, 2007). In this regard, scale and scaling process provide us with “a vertical image of space, of space as stratified and therefore power-invested” (Blommaert, 2010).

2.02 Discourse analysis

By addressing linguistic landscape as spatial narration, we are able to inspect it as discourse, or language-in-use (language actually used in specific contexts), and hence to conduct a discourse analysis by taking this narration as the unity of language itself (saying), development of activities (doing) and establishment of social situated identity (being) (Gee, 2013). According to Gee, when someone says certain contents, he simultaneously expresses his situational position and activity which are necessary to be fully understood by listeners. In other words, language gains its meaning from ways of saying (informing), doing (action) and being (identity). Particularly, non-linguistic elements are also considered as contributive in the process of informing, such as gestures, actions, facial expressions of the speakers, attitudes, values, beliefs and emotions of the linguistic community as well as symbols, instruments and technological methods involved in the context, etc, and thereby the notion of “Discourse” (a capital ‘D’) is developed by Gee (2013) as “socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting, in the ‘right’ places and at the ‘right’ times with the ‘right’ objects”. By focusing on both content and structure (“grammar”) of discourse, or in other words information and its way of organization, this study follows the descriptive approach of discourse analysis to describe the way language works and hence to explain how the world works by language and why it works that way.

2.03 Multilingualism in Dalian

Dalian, the only warm water port in northeast China, was ruled by different invaders as significant international portal in colonized age, and as a result, foreign goods and services together with alien thoughts and civilizations flooded into this city from the very beginning of its development and urbanization. It is among the earliest Chinese cities that have been the arena for internationality and globality. On that ground, the interaction between traditional local culture and the practices brought by foreign civilizations has grown into a part of its historical and social image. To date, there are still some Japanese and Russian linguistic or semiotic elements in Dalian local dialect; even the name “Dalian” itself is originated from a Russian word “Dalny” (Russian: Дальний; Dal'nii). This unique locality displays itself in the linguistic, or in a general sense semiotic landscape in this city. English, Japanese, Russian, French, are common public scripts in road or shop signs in Dalian.

In order to examine the operation of language through linguistic landscape in Dalian, this study concentrates on the region around Zhongshan Square, the central town of Dalian as focal area. Zhongshan Square and other architectural complex around are mostly historical sites that have been built up for more than 100 years and this region has been the political, economic, and cultural center of

Dalian since its establishment. Although the political power is relocated currently, it is still the most international economic and cultural zone of Dalian and hence displays a more multilingual feature in public signage. To better manage and organize this study, two research questions are designed:

- With the hypothesis that there is an indexical value in the multilingual use of language, what features can be found in “saying” namely the information provided by both linguistic and non-linguistic contents of linguistic landscape in Dalian?
- Regarding this indexing process as the activity developed (“doing”), what kind of socially situated identity (a certain way of “being” in the world at certain time and places for a certain purpose) is established?

3.0 Methodology

The study follows qualitative approach and concentrates on ethnography rather than description or distribution of linguistic landscape. The data are collected through participant observation by taking pictures of public text in area around Zhongshan Square, together with their spatial context and materiality. Also, ethnographic interviewing is used as a complement to the collected visual data. As to data analysis, this study employs the discourse-analytical approach developed by Scollon and Scollon (2003), in which the following four categories-regulatory discourses, infrastructural discourses, commercial discourses and transgressive discourses are indentified. In this study, regulatory and infrastructural discourses are regarded as one category, referring to official signs such as road signs, street names, stele inscriptions, public notices, and so on; commercial discourses are signs made for business use, such as shop names, billboard, etc. Transgressive discourses, most typically represented by graffiti or tags, usually violate the expected order of semiotics in a certain place, and are out of our discussion here. By that criterion, the 61 collected pictures are respectively coded as commercial (46) and official (15) and then are closely inspected separately, for the reflection of local-community ideology and official ideology regarding multilingualism.

4.0 Findings and discussions

4.01 Absence in commercial discourse

Linguistic landscape, as pointed out by Leeman and Modan (2010), is “a vehicle for the specialization of culture and commodification of space”. The following section explores this commodification side of linguistic landscape in order to interpret the social and cultural meanings it specialized. In this discursive frame, most pictures are recorded for shop names, bill boards, and promotional posters, together with their environments.

It is a fashion for companies, foreign or local, to follow a stable pattern in the configuration of their shop names: name in Chinese, name in English (or name in the original language where the company comes from), and trademark. However, the actual audiences or readers these signs are supposed to address are not necessarily speakers of English or any other languages (there do exist signs directly address those speakers but are in small quantity). Chinese is the native language for the majority of residents in Dalian. It is understandable for foreign companies to use a Chinese name as part of their localization strategy as it is much easier for people to notice it, recognize it and remember it. What’s more interesting here is the addition of a foreign counterpart in the name of brand when there is no need to do so since their customers and business partners are mostly native speakers of Chinese. This phenomenon, according to Lanza and Woldemariam (2013), reflects that the use of English in a certain region intersects with power and prestige, which is proved by the fast growth of English learning and training business and consequent advertising campaigns in the city’s landscapes to some degree. One of the most popular English learning centres in Dalian Zhongshan is “未来英语” (English for future). It is a subsidiary of the multinational corporation Aston Educational Group and “English for future” is part of its localization strategy to attract English learners by indicating or to some degree creating the need and significance of English capacity: English is future, so learn and improve it.

However, plenty of multilingual shop signs and bill boards break the general pattern we mentioned before in various aspects of “saying”. In order to investigate these multilingual signs more closely, this study resorts to the study of Reh, who offers some parameters in the analysis of multilingual text including a typology indicating patterns of information arrangement (duplicating, fragmentary, overlapping; and complementary) and visibility of multilingualism (2004).

Figure 1: Shop sign for a hair shop



The shop sign in figure 1 contains both Chinese and English. Morphologically speaking, the Chinese phrase “丝雅” is not a common pattern in Chinese: “丝” means “silk” or “silk-like”, and is used as a symbolic image of hair in this context; “雅” is mostly used to describe the state of classic, grace, and pleasant. The foreign word “salon”, is originally a French word meaning a gathering of people under a relaxing environment to either amuse one another or refine the taste and increase the knowledge of the participants through conversation; and later it was borrowed into English to refer to “an establishment where a hairdresser, beautician, or couturier conducts trade” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2014). Therefore, “salon” is not a translation of either “丝” or “雅” but tells business the shop deals with, and “丝雅” displays its uniqueness and identity as shop name. This pattern breaks the general mode of multilingual written texts in Dalian by its complementary rather than paralleling distribution of information. In the following interview with the shop owner, he said that he did not expect all the people to have the literacy to comprehend English and hence to understand what “salon” means, while he believed customers could figure it out by looking into the big French windows.

Figure 2: A road display of a famous clock brand



When asked the motivation to use the word “salon” in brand name, he explained that this is partly for the convenience of foreign customers, but more importantly, to show the good quality of their service by indicating it as international and fashionable. Thereby, the word “salon” here does have informational value, but it functions more of an image in its own semiotic right. In other words, the absence of the foreign word’s Chinese counterpart contributes to a more symbolic rather than informational use of language.

Figure 2 shows the basement of a road clock, as a kind of advertisement for the world-famous clock brand-Omega. The clock is put up before the high-end shopping mall Youyi Department Store, where most luxurious goods and services around the world are offered. This sign is extremely simple in design: trademark “Ω” and the written word “Omega”. What noticeable here is the absence of Chinese elements, despite it is an established international brand in China and does have a localized Chinese name translated directly by its pronunciation. Furthermore, considering its materiality and visually, the strong contrast formed by black marble versus silvery metal word in the capital form visually distances readers from the sign. Also, being different from that in Figure 1, the main aim of this road display is more of a promotion tool rather than an attraction as Omega associated with a much stronger purchasing power. In other words, it is not for attracting audience to buy their products (even though it is the ultimate goal, we are only concerned with the situated meaning of linguistic landscape), but for incepting the image of the brand that is exquisite and prestigious into readers’ perception by intense semiotic compression and distancing.

Figure 3: Shop sign of a Japanese restaurant



Shop sign in figure 3 displays the subtle interaction between informational and symbolic value of Chinese in a more inconspicuous way. “炭火焼肉”, which appears in the right of the picture, is the Japanese way cooking barbecue. “匠”, originally refers to people who are professional in particular jobs, and can be understood as experts in a specific field. But these Chinese-looking characters are not Chinese but Japanese accompanied by their Romanized sound marks-SUMIBI YAKINIKU and TAKUMI. The phrase “笑樂” is an attribution to the company that runs the business, and is an imitation to the very famous food brand “笑樂” in Kyushu Island, Japan. This phenomenon is termed by Kasanga (2010) as “clone advertisement” where the allusion to international trademarks and brand names “can be compared to the use of English as an index to an identity associated with modernity among these local language users” (Lanza & Woldemariam , 2013). In this way, the image of this small restaurant is constructed as genuine “Japanese” and hence indicates an upper scale in self-identification. In short, although Chinese is absent in this sign, it is still informational as readers can easily understand the necessary messages and symbolic for the underlying indexicality it displays within its own semiotic system.

In summary, there is an attempting invisibility of Chinese in the multilingual use of language in Dalian in its informational presentation, including the arrangement (such as distribution, configuration and composition) and visibility (materiality, color, font, or foreign semiotic elements, be it alphabets of an ancient language, sound marks annotating the shop name, or national flag of a country faraway) of information. In accordance to the hypothesis we made, the absence of Chinese in the multilingualism indexes a certain “being”. By semiotically packaged signs, local language users identify themselves as modern and prestigious and transform their image from what Bourdieu (1984) calls “taste of necessity-the subordination of form to the function’ to “taste of luxury-the mode of representation, the style, an

aesthetics that differs in the distance of their users to economic necessity and practical urgency”, and this is part of a rescaling process where the stratified and hierarchical space reorders which is consistent with the dynamics of social situated identity.

4.02 Absence in regulatory & infrastructural discourse

Regulatory and infrastructural linguistic landscapes, including official signs such as road signs, street names, public notices, etc. are observed and examined in this section. This discursive frame reflects the ideological position of official bodies towards multilingualism in public texts either conspicuously or inconspicuously. Most collected signs are bilingual with the co-existence of Chinese and English, and this study mainly investigates the characteristics of translation from Chinese to English.

Figure 4 shows the typical appearance of a directional road sign: in the right section, Chinese place name is put on the top with English counterpart on the bottom; the left section displays the road name the arrow pointing at. In this sign, there is a word that appears twice-“港”, but no same morpheme is identified in the English words because of two different translation strategies. The “港” in “大连港” is translated semantically into “Port”, complemented by the image of a steamship.; while in “港湾广场”, it is simply transliterated into “Gang”, attached by the morpheme “wan”(“湾”), together with which expressing the meaning of “harbor”. For people who cannot understand Chinese, they will not gain the actual meaning of “Gangwan Square”; for them, it’s just a place that can be referred to as “Gangwan”.

Figure 4: Road sign picture Road sign picture I



Figure 5: Road sign picture II



Figure 6: Road sign picture II



Figure 7: Road sign picture II



In figure 5, only three words in the text are translated semantically-“street” for “街”, “road” for “路”, “island” for “岛”. The rest of words are all transliterated phonologically-“Qiqi” for “七七”(the seventh), “Shengli” for “胜利”(victory), “Bangchui” for “棒棰”(wooden club). Thereby, the translation of the modifying elements of the place names do not restore the actual meaning of the original language but still have the referential value because the semantically translated head nouns together

with the additional information regarding distance can present the semiotic position clearly. However, in the road sign in Figure 6, the word “街”, “road” in English, is transliterated into “Jie”, the same as the strategy applied to the remaining modifying part. A more extreme case is a sign that directs Zhongshan Square, where its Chinese version “中山广场” is transliterated into “Zhongshan Guangchang” which is hard for English speakers without any knowledge of Chinese or background information to gain enough directional hints from the words that are English-like. Thereby, the alphabetic words are not strictly English and hence the co-existence of Chinese and English cannot be called “bi-lingual” but “bi-scriptural”, which is better illustrated by the sign in Figure 7. It is a scheduled bus stop with Chinese pinyin “BAN CHE CHENG JIANG ZHAN” annotated below Chinese characters “班车乘降站”. What should be noticed is that the alphabetic note does not deliver any informational content to the audience who are mostly local people that have to commute among different zones of Dalian and around area.

To conclude, the informational value of English or English-like words in the examined linguistic landscapes is absent. The presentation of them is not for the aim to deliver information, but to declare the existence of foreign scripts in their own rights, and hence the symbolic value of the linguistic landscapes transcends their informational value. This absence, in the sense of saying, is an indexing tool that indicates a socially situated identity associated with international, modern and global-minded when readers perceive the city of Dalian.

5.0 Conclusions

The present study investigates the indexical value of multilingualism and the way it operates in Dalian, as well as the interaction between social and economic space and corresponding spatial practices. By examining linguistic landscapes which are divided into commercial and regulatory & infrastructural discourse as conceptual distinction between “bottom-up” and “top-down” (Backhaus, 2006), or “from below” and “from above” (Coupland, 2010), it is found that the indexical value of linguistic landscape is performed by the negotiation between its symbolic and informational functions; in this process, the multilingual use of language in Dalian is more symbolic rather than informational. In commercial discourse, this is achieved by the absence of Chinese in the presentation, configuration, distribution and composition of information; and in regulatory & infrastructural discourse, it is the absence of informational value of English in either bi-lingual or bi-scriptural context. This narrative strategy can be viewed as “sociolinguistic consumption” which situating language choice as “consumption firmly within a framework of social class, access and privilege” (Stroud & Wee, 2012), and indexes a prestigious status and a global lifestyle that achieve the expected rescaling in readers’ perceived space.

The examined linguistic landscape in Dalian has presented itself at the convergence of global dynamics and local contexts. In other words, the activity of “rescaling” or “indexing”, together with the identity of “modern”, contributes to the spatial narration of local community’s attitudes toward globalization.

Linguistic landscape is the nexus for discursive frames that touch on modernity, identity, development and power and in this study, “absence” in this spatial narration of Dalian is the key entry point to discover local language ideology in late modernity. Absence of local language and informational value of foreign scripts index an identity associated with modernity and prestige; in other words, it is an indexing tool that complements the use of international languages such as English in the era of globalization. For future researchers who are interested in issues alike, a more subtle investigation on the position of sign readers is recommended to better interpret signs in question.

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