

Exploring Multilingual Practices in Billboard Advertisements in a Linguistic Landscape

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ABSTRACT

Studying linguistic landscape (LL) is a relatively new area of sociolinguistics that encompasses written language on public road signs, billboard advertisements and shop fronts. The term, LL, can be traced to the seminal work of Landry and Bourhis (1997). It is through the lens of LL that this study aims to examine the linguistic practices and code choices in billboard advertisements in the 'cityscape' of a capital city. Spolsky (2004) states the real language policy of a community is likely to be found in its practices than in management of the policy. With this in mind, this study examines official documents that articulate and prescribe linguistic and code choice policies for billboard advertisements and apply the policies to analyse selected billboards along a stretch of highway in a cityscape. Thus, the reality of the practice is what matters most. The prescribed language policies provide a sense of the ideal that a society could strive for in nationhood practices; but the reality of practice reveals the choice and use. The results of these practices point to language accommodations made within a linguistically heterogeneous society. The LL is evidently a negotiation site of the reality and the ideal in language contact management affected by different forces that are politically and socially motivated.

Keywords: Billboard advertisements, linguistic landscape, language policy, linguistic practices, language contact

INTRODUCTION

The study of linguistic landscape (LL) is a comparatively new area of sociolinguistic work, and in the last decade or so, LLs have captured the attention of many researchers. The focus of LL research has mainly been on written language in the public space

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rather than how language is communicated in the spoken mode. Backhaus (2006), in his review, states that ever since the seminal paper on LL by Landry and Bourhis in 1997, research into this field of study has been enjoying growing interest. Among the studies done were those by Scollon and Scollon (2003) who developed 'geosemiotics' – an overall approach to the study of language on signs; Reh (2004) proposed a model to describe and analyze multilingual written texts through her study done in Lira Town, while Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara and Trumper-Hect (2004) conducted a large-scale study of language on signs in Israelite cities.

In the Asian region, Backhaus (2006) researched on multilingual signs in Tokyo, giving special attention to the difference between the official and non-official multilingual signs, while Huebner (2006) examined the LLs of 15 Bangkok neighbourhoods in terms of language contact, language mixing and language dominance. Most of the LL studies looked at shop signs, shop fronts, street names, public signs, and also place names. However, LL research that focuses on billboard advertising in relation to language policy is still a novel research direction. This study is conceptualized to explore a LL focused on billboard advertising in relation to specific language policies of a country.

The concept of linguistic landscape is defined by Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 25) as one that shows language use in a range of entities such as that of public road signs, advertising billboards, street

names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings, which in combination constitutes a linguistically defined landscape of a given place. LL, therefore, refers to "the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs" (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 23).

Dailey *et al.* (2005), however, elaborate that LL should consist of more than signs outside and inside shops and businesses. LLs should also be comprised of other aspects such as advertisements that one receives at home, the languages heard on television, the languages that one hears when strolling in the neighbourhood, and also when the teacher speak to her pupils in her classroom. On the other hand, Shohamy and Waksman (2009) further widen the LL scope by incorporating all possible 'discourses' that materialize in public space to give meaning. According to them, LL is not only assembled by language, it is also constructed by other modalities such as what is seen, what is heard, what is spoken, and what is thought.

An LL territory, according to Landry and Bourhis (1997), can serve two basic functions; namely, informal and symbolic. An informal function provides information on the linguistic characteristics and geographical boundaries of a particular linguistic group, and also provides accessibility of a particular language to provide for communication in that territory. The symbolic function, on the other hand, involves perception of members of a language group which embodies values and

status of their own languages vis-a-vis other languages (Gorter & Bourhis, 2008). In this study, both functions are explored, but greater emphasis is given to the informative aspects of billboard signs rather than the symbolic.

The growing interest in LL as a field of study gives added value to research on multilingualism, which previously appeared to have a bias on analyzing aspects of speech, such as pronunciation and accent, determining how language varieties are articulated and signified within communities (Ball, 2010). LL work extends on perspectives into multilingualism through the study of written/ visual forms to provide contextual information in the sociolinguistic environment (Gorter & Shohamy, 2009; Backhaus, 2007; Gorter, 2006; Lawrence, 2012). In addition, LL studies, in accordance to Gee (2007) and Burmark (2003) would be able to assist us in understanding how languages are developed and practiced by a community in a linguistically heterogeneous environment if apposite methodologies are utilized.

Language policies and practices in a community are yet another context that LL is able to accommodate. LL aids in the comprehension of how language policies are played out by the authorities (a top-down process) and how they are actually implemented by the community (a bottom up process). Spolsky (2004) emphasizes that the real language policy is likely to be found in its practices than in the management of the policy. In support, Cenoz and Gorter (2006, p. 68) say that there is the presence of

an overt and covert policy in informing the practices in the linguistic landscape. While there are official policies that guide the setting up of street names and other signs, there is impact that operates bottom-up from the signs and posters that form impressions on how the policy is negotiated. In this way, there could then be an unofficial policy that could have far ranging influence on the linguistic landscape.

This study also examines official documents that articulate and prescribe linguistic and code choice policies for billboard advertisements and actual language practice in billboard advertisements around the survey area to assess the tension between policies implemented by the authorities and that of the community in language practices.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Generally, this study aims to examine the linguistic practices and code choices in billboard advertisements of a selected cityscape through the lens of LL. It also focuses on the overt language practice in relation to a stated language policy for billboard advertising. Specifically, the study aims to investigate the relationship between language practice in billboard advertising and language policy in Malaysia and how linguistic choices are coded on billboard signs in a specific cityscape.

BACKGROUND

In order to understand the language operations in a LL, it is important to take cognizance of some social and political factors that help shape the LL under study. To

begin with, the status of a national language has to be appreciated. The site for the study is Malaysia, where the Malay language, Bahasa Malaysia (BM), according to the Malaysian Constitution, is the country's national and official language. An excerpt from the Constitution of Malaysia [Article 152(1)] (amendments up to 1 January 2006) that defines the use of the national language and the use of other languages could be found in Appendix A.

Living in a multicultural country, Malaysians, however, are free to communicate in whichever languages that they feel comfortable with especially for social purposes. Aside from the vernacular languages and dialects (Tamil, Mandarin Chinese, Iban, etc.), English is also widely used as the country's second or third language. Meanwhile, selected vernacular languages are taught in schools, and English is widely used in colleges and universities, after the school years where it is also learnt as a subject. This heterogeneity in language use is transferred to other spheres and spaces of life, such as in the media and businesses.

As far as English is concerned, it is stated officially in the Constitution that the English language is permitted to be used in some official situations such as in courts and parliament, BM is the language in government official functions and is the medium of instruction in national schools. The media (newspaper and radio), however, is allowed to operate in many languages such as that of Tamil and Mandarin Chinese, and the computer channels global information using many more international languages.

The medium of billboard advertisements is governed by local council by-laws that state that BM must be used in public signboards (including billboards) and road names. While this is the official policy, it has not been totally adhered, as a quick survey would reveal the inconsistencies between policy and practice. Therefore, the situation warrants an in-depth study to examine the discrepancies between the language policy and actual language practices. In addition, a petite selective description of LL (restricted to billboard advertising) will attest to the vibrancy of language contact, or the lack of it, situated in a geopolitical ecology.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

In this study, there are a number of methodological issues that need to be explained. They fall into three main aspects. One pertains to document analysis of language policy statements in relation to billboard signs and the other deals with the signs themselves, in terms of location and the choice of linguistic codes in the signs. Finally, the third deals with the use of an analysis framework to account for the choices in linguistic codes associated with the signs.

Language Policy for Billboard Advertising

The Constitution of Malaysia, Article 152(1) and the National Language Act 1963 provides the base for other government organizations, institutions and authorities to design their own language policy for specific operations. The language policy for advertisements in Malaysia that presents

detailed regulations can be extracted from the Verification Procedures of National Language in Advertising (A relevant excerpt is given in Appendix B).

These regulations provide specific details on the use of BM purportedly in support of the language as the national language. From the policy documents, it could be seen that though the regulations give allowance to the use of foreign language(s), the use of the national language (BM) is very much emphasized and prioritized.

Determining the Survey Item/Site and Analysis Framework

Data collection has to be located within a LL survey site. Backhaus (2007) recommends two fundamental points be taken into consideration in order to obtain a sound data collection procedure; these include determination of the survey items and also the geographical limits of the survey area. Thus, the survey item has to be restricted. In this study, LL is restricted to advertising billboards. The geographical limitation was confined to one district. Only billboard advertisements along the PLUS (*Projek Lebuh raya Utara Selatan/ North-South Highway Project*) highway, specifically the stretch from the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) toll booth to KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International Airport) and back (KLIA toll – KLIA – KLIA toll) is considered. The stretch is about 11.3 km one way and is situated in the district of Sepang in the state of Selangor. This restriction is rationalized on the premise that this stretch of highway

showcases a high level of language contact through billboard advertising commissioned by various agencies to give salient messages to the public. A total number of 62 billboard advertisements along the selected survey route were identified to form the sample for the study. This survey area was also chosen, as it is the ‘entrance and exit route’ to Malaysia for both local citizens and foreigners. Hence, the billboard advertisements along the highway were relevant LL artifacts to be explored as they would be representative of the advertising language culture that characterized a particular linguistic cityscape.

Billboard advertisements are considered as signs in LL, applying Backhaus’ (2006, p. 55) definition which says, “A sign was considered to be any piece of written text within a spatially definable frame”. The signs were gathered and categorized according to the following criteria:

- Whether the signs are government or private signs
- Number of languages used on the signs
- Presence of translations on the signs
- Language(s) used on the signs

Analysis Framework

To analyse the signs, a composite framework by Backhaus (2006) was adopted. It includes Reh’s (2004) taxonomy of types of multilingual information arrangement, as well as Spolsky and Cooper’s (1991) framework on language use for LL.

Reh’s taxonomy lays out four types of multilingual information arrangement

for interpretation. The information may be: 1) *duplicating* – for this criterion, all information is presented in more than one language; 2) *fragmentary* – for this criterion, the full information is only given in one language, however, some selected parts have been translated into an additional language(s); 3) *overlapping* – for this criterion, the object is categorized as overlapping only if parts of its information is repeated in at least one more language, while other parts of the text remain in only one language; 4) *complementary* – for this criterion, two or more languages in the signs express completely different contents, while knowledge of the languages involved is needed to comprehend the whole message.

Spolsky and Cooper (1991) formulated three conditions for the use of languages in the LL in their study on language signs in Jerusalem; (1) write signs in a language you know, (2) prefer writing signs in the language(s) that intended readers are assumed to read, and (3) prefer writing signs in your own language or in a language with which you wish to be identified. The conditions are related to the assumptions made by the sign writer.

Backhaus's composite approach to data analysis was adopted and applied to this study. In his study, Backhaus demonstrated the different characteristics of official and non-official multilingual signs. These differences are captured in terms of the languages contained in the signs, their arrangement on a sign (where he also explained the presence of translation), power and solidarity as well as the distribution of languages used on the signs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Using information on language policy and that gathered through the analysis framework, the findings and discussion section is organized into various subsections, as follows:

Government-sponsored versus Privately-sponsored Signs

In line with Landry and Bourhis' (1997) and Backhaus' (2006) works, the signs were divided into government-sponsored signs (GSS) and privately-sponsored signs (PSS). They explained that GSS are public signs that are used by national, regional, or municipal governments, while PSS include commercial signs. Billboard advertisements put up by organizations that are government-linked companies (GLCs) are counted as GSS. GLCs are defined as companies that have a primary commercial objective and in which the Malaysian Government has a direct controlling stake (www.khazanah.com.my). In this study, 79.03% (49/62) of the billboard advertisements were found to be PSS. This is expected as commercial advertising is likely to be dominated by private companies rather than by government agencies in a market driven economy.

Monolingual versus Multilingual Signs

Table 1 below shows the distribution of monolingual and multilingual billboard advertisements for both GSS and PSS. It clearly shows that multilingual signs dominate the selected LL with 75.5% being multilingual for PSS and 61.5% for GSS (see Table 1). It could be said

that since the selected survey area is the entrance and exit route to Malaysia, the billboard advertisements are catering both for foreigners or tourists who visit Malaysia and local road users.

TABLE 1
Monolingual vs Multilingual Signs

Type of sign	GSS	%	PSS	%
Monolingual	5	38.5	12	24.5
Multilingual	8	61.5	37	75.5
Total	13	100	49	100

The distribution of languages on 62 billboards in the database of this study was also calculated to reveal the frequency of the languages used on the billboards. From the data collected, it was found that in most billboards, the dominant language used is English (87%), followed by BM (74.1%) and other languages; Chinese (6.5%), French (3.25) and Japanese (1.6%) (see Table 2). As for the policy, the National Language in Advertisements Confirmation Procedure (Tatacara Pengasahan Bahasa Dalam Iklan) states that;

The advertisements must abide by the related Act and regulations such as the Advertisement by-law (Federal Territory) 1982 stated in the Local Council Act 1976 as follows:

An advertisement has to be in BM on its own or together with other language(s) (PU (A) 364/85).

Clearly the data refute the intended practice. Rather, what appears is a somewhat

balanced use of English and BM, with an inclusion of a smattering of other foreign languages.

TABLE 2
Distribution of Languages contained on the billboards (N=62)

Language	Signs	%
BM	46	74.1
English	54	87.0
Chinese	4	6.5
French	2	3.2
Japanese	1	1.6
Counted signs	62	100

Presence of Translation

In analyzing multilingual signs, translations cannot be ignored as part of the realities in a LL. According to mutual relationships of the languages, whether or not they constitute a translation of each other is a point for consideration (Backhaus, 2006). Translation can be categorized as those containing mutual translation - partially or in total and those that do not contain mutual translation. Table 3 shows the information arrangement of translations in the GSS and PSS.

TABLE 3
Information Arrangement, GSS vs PSS

Information arrangement	GSS	%	PSS	%
Containing mutual translation	6	75	17	46
Not containing mutual translation	2	25	20	54

The GSS clearly shows a preference for mutual translation. This finding is similar to Backhaus's (2006) findings on information arrangement in his study on multilingual signs in Tokyo. In this study,

most of the mutual translation for the government multilingual signs is from BM to English, as shown in figures below. As for the multilingual PSS, there were a few billboards with translations from Chinese to BM, as shown in the example below.

Billboards 1 and 2 below display information arrangement that shows duplicating – where information is presented in both languages; BM and English (Billboard 1) and Chinese and BM (Billboard 2). According to Reh (2004), duplicating in multilingual billboard writing is when the same text is presented in more than one language. This, according to Reh, clearly signals the presence of multilingualism in the language use of a society. She further adds that multilingualism has other impacts; that of moulding an identity founded on the linguistic and also the cultural practices of a community.

In the sign discussed (Billboard 2), the national identity relates to the statehood of China as the service provider and the use of BM and English is illustrative of the recognition of a national language policy and that of the ‘equality’ of a significant dominant international language (English).

Table 3 also shows the existence of information arrangement that does not contain mutual translation. In the data collected, 2 multilingual GSS and 20 multilingual PSS do not contain mutual translations. Most of the billboard advertisements display complementary use which illustrates the use of two or more languages to express completely different contents, but both play complementing roles. According to Reh, knowledge of the languages involved is required in comprehending the whole message and this implies an existence of multilingual efficient readers at the base



Billboard 1: Malaysian Airlines Advertisement



Billboard 2: Shenzhen Airlines Advertisement

level. In a country like Malaysia, citizens are linguistically diverse and they could be basal efficient readers of languages exposed to them during formal schooling. Billboard 3 below is an example of a GSS that does not contain mutual translation. The information contains two languages, in order of appearance: BM followed by English. The information in English ‘Selangor has more...’ is complementing the information in BM promoting Selangor as a holiday destination. This complementary role of languages obviously has pragmatic functions. It appeals to internationalism of language use, as tourists must be attracted through a known language. At the same time, there is a need to satisfy national language aspirations.

Linguistic Code Preference

The code preference of the GSS and PSS is analyzed using Spolsky and Cooper’s framework. It embodies three underlying assumptions that accompany the conditions

of language choice on signs imposed by the sign writer, as stated earlier.

From the data in Table 4, the PSS appears to prefer using of English and other languages (54.8%), with a breakdown of English (49.3%) and other languages (5.5%). The GSS obviously promotes the use of the national language more though surprisingly it did not take up a large percentage (56.3%). This would mean the GSS is seen to resort noticeably to the use of other languages usually for complementary purposes. This finding supports Backhaus’ (2006) study of multilingual signs in Tokyo, where he highlighted that the use of other languages is more prominent than that of the Japanese language, the national language.

TABLE 4
Code preference among GSS and PSS (N=62)

Code Preference	GSS	%	PSS	%
BM	9	56.3	33	45.2
English	5	31.2	36	49.3
Other languages	2	12.5	4	5.5
Total	13	100	73	100



Billboard 3: Advertisement from Selangor Tourism (a GSS)

The languages in the signs underscored Spolsky and Cooper's assumptions of language use among sign writers. The first two assumptions; 'write signs in a language you know' and 'prefer writing signs in the language(s) that intended readers are assumed to read' were self-evident in the use of languages for the PSS. In contrast, the GSS preferred using BM, which was aligned to the third assumption, 'prefer to write signs in your own language or in a language with which you wish to be identified'.

The main drive for this assumption is evidently political and sociocultural. According to Backhaus (2006), language choice in GSS is likely motivated by power relations, whereas the PSS is more likely to use foreign languages in expressing solidarity. From the analysis, there appears to be an apparent conflict of interest, but this conflict, if it does exist, is tolerated as authorities show democratization towards the enterprise. Nonetheless, the power play in language choice is in place. Backhaus (2006, p. 62) takes note that language choice has its constraints; official signs inevitably are more governed by regulations put in place by governing authorities while non-official signs can be more liberal. In other words, sign writers are in a position to take greater charge of which language to use on these signs to show their preferences. This language preference then becomes his 'policy' and if continuously effected on a regular basis can be perpetuated as an unwritten rule leading to a form of established socio-cultural practice in a community. Such practices thus eventuate

and accentuate as features of a linguistic landscape.

In the case of the Malaysian LL with reference to billboards, the power play is moderate as the choice of the dominant languages is not skewed. This means that generally there is a balance in the use of languages which affirms a peaceful coexistence between languages used in a multilingual country.

CONCLUSION

This study has illustrated the perspectives on LL conditions in a cityscape. It explored the linguistic practices and code choices of billboard advertisements in a selected cityscape. It also discussed the relationship between language practice and stated language policy for billboard advertising through data analysis in terms of distribution of language, presence of translation, as well as code preference in the GSS and PSS.

There appeared to be a difference between the prescribed language policy and the actual language(s) used on the billboard advertisements. The Advertisement by-law (Federal Territory) 1982 regulates that 'an advertisement has to be in BM on its own or together with other language(s)' and priority and emphasis must be given to wordings or placing of the letters of the alphabet in BM. According to this policy, any advertisement that does not abide by the policy would not be allowed to be displayed. However, as seen in the findings of this study, the overt practice shows the contrary; the national language, BM, is not used in all billboard advertisements as prescribed and they

continue to be displayed. This leads to some noteworthy inferences. One is the tolerance of 'deviant' language practices by authorities. In other words, the official stand taken in the use of languages for billboard signage is moderated as the authorities seem to be rather accommodating even when BM is not used in some signage. Secondly, there exists a perceived need in using a language that connects best to the public and that language needs not be the national language. Thirdly, the findings support Spolsky's contention that language management of a language policy is best illustrated through public display of actual language use. The findings make a clear public statement of the extent actual language approximate official language policy statement. Finally, it can be concluded that societal needs and attitudes are flourishing forces that determine language use, and this speaks volumes on how languages are maintained. Languages thrive in a vibrant linguistic landscape which serves to inform, perpetuate, and at the same dispel restrictive notions on language use. Thus, LLs are constantly shaped and reshaped through the ebb and flow of socio and geopolitical forces operating in a dynamic society.

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APPENDIX A

An excerpt from the Constitution of Malaysia (Article 152(1) (amendments up to 1 January 2006))

*The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in such script as Parliament may by law provided that **(a)** no person shall be prohibited or prevented from using (otherwise than for official purposes), or from teaching or learning, any other language; and **(b)** nothing in this clause shall prejudice the right of the Federal Government or of any State Government to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language of any other community in the Federation.*

<http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/malaysia.pdf>

APPENDIX B

An Excerpt from the Verification Procedures of National Language in Advertising (Malaysia)

6.0 ADVERTISEMENTS

6.12 The advertisements must abide by the related Act and regulations such as the Advertisement by-law (Federal Territory) 1982 stated in the Local Council Act 1976 as follows:

1. An advertisement has to be in BM on its own or together with other language(s)(PU (A) 364/85).
2. The wordings or letters in BM have to be given priority in terms of colour and have to be placed in a clearer position than wordings or letters or writings in other language(s) and their size must not be bigger than the ones in BM (PU (A) 364/85).
3. Any advertisement that does not abide to paragraphs (1) and (2) cannot be displayed or caused to be displayed or is allowed to be displayed by anyone (PU (A) 187/82).
4. Regardless of the allotment in paragraph (3), if the name of any firm, association or company registered under the Business Registration Act 1956, Company Act 1965 or Organization Act 1966 consists of words that are or inclusive of language(s) which are not BM, translation to BM is not needed (PU (A) 187/82).
5. *Regardless of the allotment in paragraph (4), the Mayor may ask for the business's, company's or association's details to abide to the allotment in paragraphs (1) and (2) (PU (A) 364/85).*

<http://appw05.dbp.gov.my/dokumen/tatacarapengesahan.pdf>