Linguistic Landscape: Forms and Functions of Signs in Thai Community Center, Golden Mile Complex, in Singapore

Atichat Rungswang

Department of Languages, Faculty of Liberal Arts,
King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang
`atichat-r@hotmail.com`

Abstract― **Research into linguistic landscape (LL) has recently received attentions from academics in social science fields such as applied linguistics or media studies, since there has been linguistic diversity existing in many countries. Aiming to extend this line of research, this study explored the linguistic landscape by investigating forms and functions of signs in Thai community center in Singapore. The data were 97 shop signs, and the analytical methods was LL methodology. They were analyzed into two main parts; language use and language function. The findings reveal that English is the dominant language in this area. Bilingual sign is the type of sign which is used the most. For the language function, "shop name" is used more than "shop detail". English used in most of shop-name signs has a function as transcription of Thai language.**

*Keyword*s― **Linguistic landscape, Singapore, signs, Thai community center**

I. INTRODUCTION

Currently, the research subject of Linguistic Landscape (LL) has become academic interest. LL studies have been conducted in many countries such as Thailand [18][19], Japan [3], South Korea [14], Netherlands and Spain [6], and Hong Kong [2] where there is significant national, cultural, and religious diversity. The results of these studies show language situations that happen in the investigated areas. Since LL can reflect language situation, cities or places where emerge language complexities are interesting to investigate. Singapore is recognized as one of the most diverse in language and culture: there are mixed ethnic groups in the country. However, studies on LL in this country are still inadequate.

According to the Ministry of Communications and Information of Singapore website, it is the smallest country in Asia with almost 5.3 million inhabitants, who come from three main ethnic groups: Chinese (74%); Malay (13%); and Indian (9%). Singapore chose to become an officially multilingual state, selecting four official languages: English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil. English is promoted as the "working language" of Singapore for inter-ethnic communication, while the other official languages are considered "mother tongues" of the major ethnic groups [9].

According to the language education policy of Singapore, Singaporean students have to study at least two languages; English and a mother tongue (www.moe.gov.sg). The aim of this education system is not only to equip students with the language competencies needed to engage with their fellow Singaporeans from different races and access into the global economy, but also to keep them connected with their cultural roots and heritage [6].

For this reason, the policy leads Singaporeans to master at least two languages, which are English and the mother tongue of their respective ethnic groups. Use of these languages can be generally found in the routine life of the Singaporeans in the communities, both in speaking and writing. This can be one possible way to investigate the roles of the different languages in the community is to conduct an LL study.

In Singapore, there are ethnic community centers including Thai, Burmese and Philippines. In these areas, there is a variety of commercial activities run by the local shop owners. However, the customers can be of any other ethnicity, who, moreover, may not speak the local language of such communities. This could make the business there to be multi-racial and multi-lingual.

Therefore, in order to see the real language situation in any communities of the multi-lingual nation like Singapore; LL can be a possible way to achieve it. The results of the study allow us to understand better the language choices made and their relation to the social and cultural aspects in the communities.

A. Linguistic Landscape

A term of Linguistic Landscape or also known as LL has been widely defined by scholars. A term that was first popularized and has become the most frequently quoted by Landry and Bourhis [13] who define it as

"The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration".

The definition is extended by Arbeit [2] by saying that "the most LL unique feature is the public space text displayed and presentation". Pavlenko [16] supports this by mentioning that the study of LL investigates the "public usage of written languages"; in addition, the meaning of LL is also clarified by the idea that LL is focused on the written language in public space [7][3][11]. The written language that is being studied in the public space can be on any of the internal and external signs located in a given location [5]. The messages on these signs not only convey linguistic meaning but also can reveal the diversity of language and culture underlying them [1]. In studying the language used on signs; LL not only represents the use of language but also reflects the power, the status, and the

importance of a particular language in a specific area [8]. Therefore, LL then emphasizes the language of signs in public spaces as its focal point of study.

In recent years, LL has become academic interest. Scholars have conducted the studies in different parts of the world where contain diversity of population, culture and language. For instance, Backhaus [3], in which he compiled a corpus of 2,444 multilingual signs observed in 28 survey areas in and around Tokyo. Backhaus distinguishes between a 'semiotic sign', defined as 'any meaningful unit interpreted as standing for something other than itself' and a 'public sign', defined as 'an inscribed surface displayed in public space in order to convey a message of wider concern to a non-specified group of readers'. He classified government-related signs as 'top-down signs' and all others as 'bottom-up'. Backhaus found that English appeared more frequently on bottom-up signs, while Japanese was predominant in top-down signs (over 97%). He concluded that public signs are a major semiotic sign of where one is in the world and what languages one ought to know.

In addition, Lawrence [14] explored LL in different regions of Seoul and Korea to analyze public signs according to percentage of English, Korean, Konglish and Chinese. English was found in the physical domains of main streets, amusement parks and foreign districts, in the product domain of beer, wine, and clothing and in the sociolinguistic domains of modernity, luxury and youth.

Another LL study conducted by Thaksin [19] who investigated signs in the major business areas of the three main ethnic groups in Singapore: Chinatown, Malay Village, and Little India. The data were collected from shops located in the major landmarks of those three mentioned areas. the study revealed that English is the most dominant language in the areas except in the area of Chinese ethnics, where Chinese is most dominant. Moreover, the bilingual sign is the type of sign which is used the most in every area. For the language function, "shop name" is the greatest used among "shop detail" and "product detail". Additionally, "shop name" is the combination of English and other mother tongues.

The research of Backhaus and others indicates two things. One is that English and other languages are administered across linguistic landscapes according to geography. Another is that they are also distributed according to domains, with previous research revealing that English seems to be most dominant in the domains of fashion, tourism, technology, and 'bottom-up' signs.

B. Language diversity in Singapore

The racial diversity of Singapore has created an environment of linguistic diversity in the country. However, the linguistic situation in the country is even more diverse than its ethnic makeup, because each ethnic group includes several dialect groups. Twenty specific "dialect groups" were listed in the 1980 census under the four key ethnic groups. In actuality, those dialects were defined collectively under English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil [12].

In the past, English was solely used as the official language for government, administration and legal matters—as stated in the British law—while the population used other existing languages. After the independence of Singapore, four languages—English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil—were designated to have equal status as the official languages to represent "the pragmatic multilingualism" policy enacted by the government [12]. Singapore has selected the three ethnic languages to represent its ethnic diversity, and English was elected as an international language for education, entertainment, industry and commerce [12]. It was the attempt of Singapore to succeed in economic development right after its independence. This then made English the more pragmatic choice.

Chinese, which is used by the Chinese ethnic group in Singapore, has many dialects but every dialect shares the common characteristic of written script. The government has chosen Mandarin Chinese to be the mother tongue for the Chinese population, and from an investigation, it was found that increasing numbers of Chinese are speaking Mandarin at home. This is a direct result of both the bilingual school policy as well numerous government campaigns. For instance, a campaign launched in 1979 called 'Speak Mandarin' served to boost up the percentage of Mandarin speakers in Chinese families [12].

In Singapore, Tamil is the language which represents the Indian community. However, a recent policy related to the mother tongue of the Indians shows a different linguistic trend. The permission to teach and learn other Indian dialects such as Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, Gujerati and Urdu was initiated.

Among the official mother tongues, Malay is only one language representing mother tongue for the majority of Malays without minority language. The Malays in Singapore have a mutual mother tongue language which is the Malay language.

As stated in the previous section, the language education policy of Singapore aims for the people to have bilingual ability; the government tries to push the patterns of usage and the status of all the four official languages to significantly conform to the national development goals. This effort is supported by the Ministry of Education (2009) which stated that

"the bilingual policy requires each child to learn English and his Mother Tongue ... This enables children to be proficient in English, which is the language of commerce, technology and administration, and their Mother Tongue, the language of their cultural heritage".

This bilingual policy indicates the national identity formation by the government, where the diversities in ethnicity still remain with the intermediary of English as a common language [12][17].

According to this review of the past research studies related to LL, the real language situation in the investigated areas can be perceived of in terms of language diversity, language patterns, and even the power of the existing languages. In Singapore, nevertheless, despite the presence of diverse ethnic groups and languages, there has been no in-depth academic study on the linguistic landscape of different ethnic community centers. Only one study explored linguistic landscape in three main business

areas. Therefore, this study consequently aims to shed light into this much-needed area of study.

C.   Research Objectives

1. To explore linguistic diversity of public signs in Thai community center in Singapore.

2. To investigate the purposes of language use of public signs in Thai community center in Singapore.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Data Collection

Thai community center

Thai community center in Singapore or well-known as 'Golden Mile Complex' located between Nicoll Highway and Beach Road. Before the complex was built, the land faced the sea and was dotted with old shop houses and wooden boats. This was redeveloped as part of the government's urban renewal scheme in the 1960s. The project was envisioned as a strata-titled mixed development. The 16-storey building became one of the first in the region to integrate shops, residences and offices into one building. Nowadays, two types of businesses dominate Golden Mile today. The first is tour agencies that specialize in bus tours to Malaysia. Every day, tour buses leave Golden Mile Complex for various places in Malaysia such as Johore and Kuala Lumpur. The second type of business catered to the crowd of Thai workers that often congregate at the complex. Thai discos, remittance centers and authentic Thai eateries mushroomed in the complex. The Friends of Thai Workers Association in Singapore also runs courses, recreational activities and a helpdesk for Thai workers at Golden Mile. The emergence of 'Little Thailand' added color and diversity to the area (www.nlb.gov.sg).

Signs

The typical methods for LL are 1) use of a camera to capture photos of linguistic signs and then 2) storage of the data in a computer for later analysis [11]. The researcher took photos of all shop signs. The method allowed the researcher to get a lot of information. For this reason, Arbeit [2] and Thaksin [19] suggested that scoping down the type of sign by clarifying what to include or exclude for clearer results is needed. Therefore, the major signs; the biggest sign above the shop entrance, most attractive and easy to notice by passers were included. On the other hand, the minor signs; smaller than the major signs and not be easily seen were considered as unimportant and finally excluded. The total numbers of signs in this investigation are 97 including all kinds of shops.

No.1 is counted as the major sign which is the data for the investigation.

No.2 is counted as the minor sign which is not included in the investigation

B.   Data Analysis

The criteria for the analysis were adapted from the studies of Arbeit [2], Singaharisi [18], Ninbanharn [15], and Thaksin [19]. The analysis was categorized into two main parts; the first part was the analysis on language use consisting of the language(s) and patterns of language used on the signs; the second part was the analysis on the language function which was further separated into two functions: shop name and shop detail.

For the analysis on the part of language use; after the arrangement of the information according to the investigation areas, the researcher had separated the types of language use by counting the number of languages appearing on each sign as the criteria. They were monolingual sign, which referred to signs with only one language; bilingual signs which referred to signs with two languages and, lastly, signs with three or more languages were counted as multilingual signs. Then, the types of language appearing on the sign by considering the alphabets presentation can be separated into English, Thai, Chinese and Tamil. For the part of language function, the researcher considered the information presented on the sign as the main by separating it into two functions: "shop name" that considered only the name of the shop; "shop detail" referred to the details of the shops such as the type of shop, branches, working hours, and awards received as well as the details of items for sale. The researchers used the aforementioned criteria to consider languages in each function similar to part one, which is the type of language use.

III. FINGINGS

A.   Language use

Shop signs in Thai community are found in three categories: monolingual, bilingual and multilingual. As shown in Table1, bilingual signs are mostly found in the area (50%). In contrast, multilingual signs are rarely found (6%). The use of monolingual sign and bilingual sign is slightly different (44% and 50% respectively). A few signs comprised of three languages (6%).

TABLE I : Type of The Shop Signs in Thai Community
(Golden Mile Complex)

Types of sign	Golden Mile Complex
Monolingual Sign	44%
Bilingual Sign	50%
Multilingual Sign (Three or more languages)	6%
Total	100%

This table shows the overall picture of the types in shop signs in the community which the details of each type will be shown in the next section.

TABLE II : Languages Used in Each Type of Shop Signs in Golden Mile Complex

Types of sign (%)	Total languages used (%)
Monolingual Sign 44%	En = 84%, Th = 16%
	100%
Bilingual Sign 50%	En-Ch = 24%, En-Th = 73%, Th-Tm = 3%
	100%
Multilingual Sign 6%	En-Th-Ch = 100%
	100%
Total signs 100%	En = 58%, Th = 31%, Ch = 10%, Tm = 1%
	100%

En = English, Th = Thai, Ch = Chinese, Tm = Tamil

In term of language used, there are four languages used on the shop signs. The result is quite interesting that English is used the most among four languages (58%). Most of monolingual signs are comprised of English (84%). English appears on all types of shop signs. Thai which is the language of community come second (31%). English and Thai is a pair that mostly used in bilingual signs (73%). Just only one sign uses Tamil.

Fig. 1 Monolingual sign (Thai)

Fig. 2 Bilingual sign (English-Thai)

Fig. 3 Multilingual sign (English-Thai-Chinese)

B.   Language function

Language function on the shop signs in this area is divided into two groups: shop name and shop detail. The detail of language function will be described below.

TABLE III : Language Functions of Shop Signs in Golden Mile Complex

Functions	Types of language use (%)	Languages used (%)
Shop name 56%	Monolingual 60%	En = 71%, Th = 29%
		100%
	Bilingual 39%	En–Ch = 18%, En-Th = 82%
		100%
	Multilingual 1%	En-Th-Ch = 100%
		100%
Total		**En = 58%, Th = 36%, Ch = 6%**
		100%
Shop detail 44%	Monolingual 58%	En = 75%, Th = 25%
		100%
	Bilingual 38%	En-Ch = 29%, En-Th = 68%, Th-Tm = 3%
		100%
	Multilingual 4%	En-Th-Ch = 100%
		100%
Total		**En = 58%, Th = 31, Ch = 10%, Tm = 1%**
		100%

En = English, Th = Thai, Ch = Chinese, Tm = Tamil

In table III, in comparison of 'shop name' and 'shop detail', there is a small different between them (56% and 44% respectively). This can be interpreted that most of the signs in Thai community are created by providing shop name and shop detail.

For the function 'shop name' in this area, monolingual sign is dominant (60%). English is the most used in this function (58%). It either stands alone as the monolingual sign or is mixed with other languages as the bilingual sign or multilingual sign. Interestingly, Thai which is the language of community is found in every type of sign (36%), but is still lesser than English. Chinese is rarely used in this function.

Another noticeable point is that English, used as shop name, is employed as a transcription for Thai shop name. For instance, instead of 'Thai barbecue', they use 'MOOKATA'. In addition, Thai letters are given priority. They are bigger and placed above English ones. Apart from the language, art and design are used to promote Thainess. Elephant, characters in Thai-style dress and traditional style of Thai letters are decorated on those signs. Hence, English is used the most in the function of 'shop name' not for its function but to foster Thainess.

Fig. 4 Monolingual shop name (English)

Fig. 5 Bilingual shop name (English-Thai)

Fig. 6 Multilingual shop name (English-Thai-Chiness)

The next function is 'shop detail', the language used in this function is very similar to 'shop name' function that monolingual sign is mostly found (58%). English is the language most employed (58%) in this function. Thai comes second (31%) and English and Thai are mostly used for bilingual signs (68%). Chinese and Tamil are minority languages. From this, it can be said that English is mostly used for the purpose of describing of shop details in the monolingual style.

Fig. 7 Monolingual shop detail (English)

Fig. 8 Bilingual shop detail (English-Thai)

Fig. 9 Multilingual shop detail (English-Thai-Chinese)

IV. DISCUSSION

From the exploration of Thai community or 'Golden Mile Complex' in Singapore, the results show that English is commonly used in this area. Thai comes second; even though, it is considered the language represented the community. The bilingual signs are the most prevailing type of sign and most of languages used in bilingual signs are English mixed with other languages especially Thai.

As I mentioned in the previous section, English was considered as an international language for education, entertainment, industry and commerce [12]. It is used in commerce because the common use of English would create equality and break down the barriers between different races as well as prevent interracial misunderstandings over language. From these reasons, it could be why English is mostly used in all types of sign, whether in monolingual, bilingual or multilingual signs.

Since the area from which I collected the data was a commercial zone. It can be noticed that not only Thais come and spend their time there, but foreigners or even Singaporeans. The shop owners intentionally find the simplest way to communicate with their customers while trying to maintain the identity of Thainess. Hence, English is used as a tool to solve this problem. Using English in this form can be only found in "shop name". For example, I found that "MOOKATA" is used for "Thai barbecue" and "NAM SAICHON" is used for "water". However, from the observation, it was found that English written in most of shop-name signs is used as transcription of Thai language not convey English meaning at all. Even though, "MOOKATA" is written in English, the non-native Thai speakers cannot understand what it really means except Thais. This can be said that the target of the use of English in "shop name" is not for the foreigner customers. Only intention of the shop owners is to maintain the identity of Thainess. Additionally, to promote the Thainess, the shop owners use Thai-style font called "Kanok" for shop name and decorate with elephant which is regarded as symbol of Thailand or characters in Thai-style dress. Another noticeable point, the status between Thai and English languages is unequal. Thai letters are given priority. The shop owners place them above English ones emphasizing by enhancing the size as bigger than English. This recalls Degi [8] who states that LL not only represents the use of language but also reflects the power, the status, and the importance of a particular language in a specific area.

For the shop details such as branches, products, price or working hours which are very vital and require clear communication; the shop owners use English, meaningful English, to communicate with customers to avoid misunderstanding.

This can indicate that the linguistic landscape has both an information and a symbolic function [13][14]. The informative function shown in the signs in different languages indicate the languages to be used in communication at shop and other businesses and also reflects the relative power of the different languages; the use of different languages in the linguistic landscape also has a symbolic function mainly when language is a salient dimension of a linguistic group [6].

V. CONCLUSION

Thought Singapore has four official languages, from the study on the linguistic landscape in the Thai community center in Singapore, it can be seen that only some of these four official languages are widely used as commerce language. On the other hand, Thai language, language of community, emerge and is used more often. Although the government tries to promote the citizens to use English and Chinese in communication, there are so many factors that affect the forms of language usage such as population ratio, economy or even cultures. From the result, English is clearly the language of international communication and other strong language which is Thai representing language of identity and community.

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