

**A Magnifying Study on Linguistic Landscape in Japan**  
**~Confronting Translation and English Text Discourse~**

**Abstract**

In this paper, I explore the language discourse of English signs in the Tokyo region, an area claimed to be undergoing the phenomenon of multilingualism. Although admittedly the Linguistic Landscape of Japan has expanded with a more diverse distribution of scripts, further observation is desired in terms of whether the written discourse is comprehensible or not for foreign audiences. My research observes the content of English writings visible in public areas and addresses the issue of incoherency. Drawing on a qualitative and empirical study following a grounded data analyses, I affirm the messages expressed in English inclining to be products derived from a Japanese linguistic framework; the English is driven by Japanese linguistic logic and perception, and will not always translate to sound natural and coherent to an audience whose first language is English. In other words, there is a tendency for a Japanese linguistic mindset to be reflected in English texts. I hope this study sheds light on the linguistic challenges of the English discourse in Japan, as well as reconsider what it truly means to embrace multilingualism.

## **I. Literature Review**

Here, I discuss the latest studies of Linguistic Landscape and its implications, along with the arguments concerning standard and non-standard English discourse.

With the world actively engaging in global activities in the spheres of business, economics and politics, English has become the key device for communication between people of different speeches (Yamada, 2010). While attempts such as the establishment of 6 official languages in the United Nations and other global organizations have been made to appreciate multilingual communication, English has been positioned as the mainstream language used in our contemporary world for global dialogue. Consequently the spread of English in Japan has increasingly become evident, with it becoming the medium for educational instruction as well as transactions in business (Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011).

Much has been said about the implications of English expanding in the world. While some have pointed out the positive outcomes such as the increase of functional speakers around the world (Yamada, 2010), in some cases English has been criticized as being invasive and working to belittle the full affirmation of linguistic and ethnic diversity (Kubota and McKay, 2009). While these findings mostly fit under the category of English colloquial discourse, the implications English has had on written discourse in non-native communities

are also a worth noting. Landry and Bourhis introduced the concept of *Linguistic Landscape* (LL), defining the terminology 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 LL of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (Backhaus, 2007). Yet, in relative comparison to the study on colloquial discourse, the study on LL has had much to desire, given the fact that its definition lacked clarity and often resulted in focusing on deviated matters (Backhaus, 2007).

In an attempt to conduct a sufficient study following the definition by Landry and Bourhis, Backhaus provided an insightful study in the field of LL, focusing on urban Tokyo. His study from 2007 indicated how although the foreign LL in urban Tokyo was dominant with English signs, it was also a diverse assortment of varying languages. The study put forward several possible explanations for the “cause of variation” (Higgins, 2011) in foreign language distribution, the first being the rising foreign population in Japan. Other reasons implied the increase of foreign signs not only as a means for multinational communication, but also for commercialism, promoting the image of “exoticism” to appear attractive (Backhaus, 2007).

Thus, Backhaus’s position is supported by those who see Japan evolve into a

“linguistically and culturally diverse” society (Morita, 2004), where the use of foreign languages (with English as the mainstream), has come to possess two roles in the realm of writing. The first and traditional one is as a “conduit” (Nakane, 2009) for multilingual communication, meaning a tool for translation. The second and newly established role is “persuasion” (Cook, 2009), which often times emits the image of “foreign” or “ethnic” so as to appear attractive and new.

Diversifying and increasing foreign signs also imply Japan’s expanding capacity to accept foreign linguistic cultures, which has traditionally been a society of “linguistic uniformity and homogeneity” (Dong, 2009). Yet, much of the scholarly discussion surrounding the global spread of English has come from a “macro, sociopolitical perspective” (Ryan, 2009), and Backhaus’ extensive research is inevitably driven by this factor. His study focused on text distribution of the English and other foreign writings rather than content or meaning of the text. The simple distribution of foreign letters in public space does not necessarily imply that meaningful discourse takes place. Evaluation on the “linguistic significance” (Creese & Blackledge, 2010) of foreign texts requires a “theoretical apparatus” (Kinging, 2004) for further examination and discussion.

Meanwhile, extensive attempts to observe the content of the texts have yet to be

made. This is perhaps because in most countries where English is spoken as a second language, “it is extremely difficult to draw the lines between correct English, creative English, and incorrect English” (Ikeshima, 2005). For instance, Honna and Yano claim that countries where English is taught as an international/foreign language is apt to localize it so as to best fit their own needs (Yamada, 2010). Because there exists a certain agreement within the region to speak in that new strand of English, “differentiating between genuine and bogus” (Augustinos & Every, 2007) English discourse is extremely difficult. Admittedly, English spoken in countries where it has traditionally been the mother tongue is considered to be most orthodox, but is not a conventional, unifying standard to distinguish proper and improper English.

Some claim that Japan has provided its local version of foreign language as “Engrish”. Claimed to be “at best odd and incomprehensible at worst” (Ikeshima, 2005), “Engrish” is a relatively new term used to refer to “poor-quality attempts by professional Japanese writers to create English words and phrases, and sometimes by other East Asian nationalities as well” (<http://www.allwords.com/word-Engrish.html>, 2012). The etymology comes from the mispronunciation of the word "English" common to speakers who have difficulty distinguishing "l" and "r" sounds (<http://www.allwords.com/word-Engrish.html>, 2012).

Increasingly diverse LL in urban Tokyo does not sufficiently prove that Japan is multilingual even at the level of active language use, meaning both oral and written communication. Language discourse under multilingual circumstances contains possibility of being “idiosyncratic” (Spack, 1997), resulting in cross-cultural misunderstanding (Murata, 2007).

The purpose of my study is to observe the LL of urban Tokyo, observing in depth the content of foreign signs in public spaces, and to identify whether these signs are results of coherent discourse.

## **II. Data and Methods**

I conducted empirical data analyses by gathering English writings which could be interpreted as idiosyncrasies, where the texts contained awkward wordings or incorrect grammatical structures. In total, I gathered 35 samples. Texts found were signs, advertisements and packages of products visible in public spaces. The gathering took place in my commuting route to university in Kanagawa Prefecture, which is approximately an hour and a half ride by train via Shibuya Station, a major station in Tokyo handling 9 lines. I also included English texts I found in shopping districts situated in walking proximity from the

university and my home.

I observed the lexical (word) choices and syntactic (grammatical) structures bearing in mind the following three questions:

- (1) What do the texts mean?
- (2) Is the message delivered in a coherent manner?
- (3) For whom is the message?

I defined “coherent” as conveying the intended message without grammatical faults or leaving room for misinterpretation. The third question addressed the possibility of who the recipients may be, which included the consideration of whether the signs were for a specific foreign audience, or simply anyone who sees them.

After the text analyses, I categorized the signs into three strands of tendencies so as to seek commonalities in the gathered samples. I labeled each category with a title indicating the featured characteristics as a means to “summarize raw data and convey key themes and processes” (Thomas, 2006) in which these texts were made. The entire processes of my analyses are parallel to those of Backhaus (2007) and Murata (2007), both of whom performed a grounded-data analysis observing English texts.

### III. Analyses

I found the English writings to have a tendency to follow specific word choices, phrasings, and tone often used in Japanese. As a result, the texts sounded awkward and unnatural, often containing grammatical inaccuracies which were clear in terms of syntactic and lexical features of the text. 60% of the samples were from multilingual signs, with the Japanese script at the top, sometimes accompanied by other languages such as Chinese or Korean. This indicates how a significant amount of English texts found to be idiosyncratic were intended for an English-speaking audience.

The awkwardness of these English texts was not simply derived from one cause such as grammatical errors, but rather from an assortment of several “tendencies”. Not all examples fit into just one of the three traits. Most samples had several tendencies, which I labeled as follows.

The first is Trait A: *Direct Translation*. Signs and writings that fit under this group were mostly renderings of texts word-for-word, instead of conveying the meaning or gist. Given the different syntactic structures of English and Japanese (i.e. Japanese verbs come at the end of the sentences, subjects are typically omitted, and nouns do not have plural forms), a word-for-word conversion tends to result in awkward phrasing or lack in grammatical

accuracy.

The second is Trait B: *Cultural Frame of Reference*, which refers to the tendency of directly converting an idea from a Japanese framework of thought into English, rather than converting the gist. The framework of thought covers not only the grammatical mindset, but also concepts unique to the Japanese language. Although texts under this classification did not suffer from as many grammatical inaccuracies as Trait A, the lexical choices were often awkward or redundant, sometimes conveying an unintended message.

The third is Trait C: *Disagreement with Established Expressions*. Established Expressions refer to commonly used wordings or phrases used in given situations, which can sometimes be colloquial, thus hard to approach by simple translation. The English texts under this grouping may convey the intended message, but sound unnatural due to redundancy or unsuitable word choice. All samples under this category had overlapping features with either Trait A or B, sometimes containing both.

**Figure1. Distribution of Traits**

<i>Traits</i>	<i># of examples</i>
A	27
B	21
C	8
A&B	13
A&C	5
B&C	5
A&B&C	3
TOTAL	35

**Figure2. Venn Diagram of Traits (Size of circle indicates number of examples)**

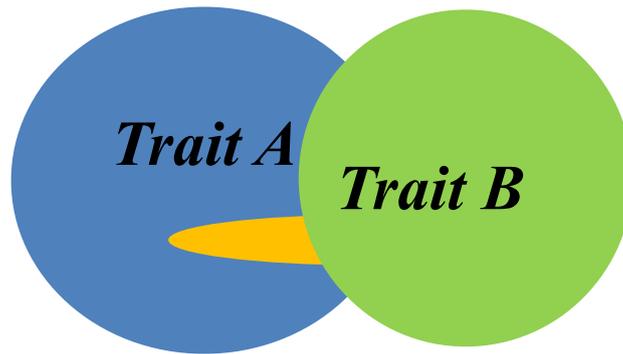


Figure1. confirms that Trait A was most likely to appear in English texts, closely followed by Trait B. Trait C appeared less prevalent, but I chose to include this tendency as a third category, given that there was a co-relation with the first two traits. Figure2. is a Venn Diagram indicating the overlapping relations between the three traits. While there were texts which fit solely under Traits A or B, this was not the case with Trait C.

The following are part of my findings, each representing one or a combination of the

three traits.

*Example1. A notice in a lavatory*



Example1 is a sign found in a lavatory with a sensory flushing system. Flushing the toilet is translated as *benki senjyou*, a noun in Japanese which means *toilet bowl wash* word-for word. The phrase *toilet-bowl washing* sounds odd, because there is no corresponding noun in English. Example 1 thus carries Trait A: *Direct Translation*.

*Example2. A sign in a supermarket*

*We will wait for the next coming to a store.*

Example2 contains the features of both traits A and B, which appears to be a direct translation of a Japanese phrase *mata no goraiten wo omachi shite orimasu* (We will be waiting for your next visit to this store). The object in the sentence sounds awkward, containing no object (representation of Trait A). "*Next coming*", is a direct translation of the

Japanese noun *raiten*, which is not understandable in English. Finally, the use of the article in “*a*” is clearly misused.

In English, the message along the same lines could be phrased as “*Please come again*” or “*We look forward to your next visit*”. The evident difference between the wordings in English and that of Japanese is how personal the tone of language is. In English it is natural to use words such as *you* or *your*, where a specific person is being addressed. In Japanese however, such words would be omitted, leaving the sentence to be relatively neutral. As a result the word *next coming* was used, which has no reference to the person being addressed. The awkwardness in Example2 occurred from not regarding the differences in terms of tone between English and Japanese. I thus categorized this example under Trait B: *Cultural Frame of Reference*.

*Example3. A notice on a diaper changing seat in a lavatory*



Example3 is well assisted by illustrations. Yet, there are issues with the language used. The first phrase “Caution, drop!” is simply an arrangement of two words, resulting in a confusing and incomplete sentence. The subject (or object) is left out in the phrase, which creates an awkward sentence. The cause of such word arrangement is attributable to writing English with Japanese linguistic connotations. Subjects and objects are often omitted in Japanese sentences when they are either obvious or already mentioned. Example3 can be deduced as English derived from a Japanese mindset, which fits in Trait B. In addition, the phrase can be interpreted as a word-to word rendition of the Japanese word *rakka-chu-i* (caution for drop), which accounts for Trait A.

The second phrase “Never Leave” fits under Trait B. While it is grammatically correct, the expression in itself is vague, leaving room for a broad interpretation. The intended message is to not leave children *unattended*, but simply saying “Never Leave” would sound as though one is forbade from leaving the lavatory.

*Example4. A sign on a restaurant*

***Specializing in good-eating soup.***

Here is another example of Trait B, where the text was very likely to have been written from a Japanese perception of “soup”. Example4 was on a sign advertising a specialty soup of a chunky texture, full of vegetables and meat prepared in coarse bits. At first glance this may not sound so awkward, apart from the phrase “good-eating”, which is arguably not a word. Yet, this sign is likely to be conveying an unintended message. Such was confirmed when also looking at the corresponding Japanese message: *taberu tame no oishii soopu (A delicious soup for eating)*.

In Japanese, soup is not a food one eats, but rather *drinks*. This is due to the fluid nature of soup, and thus is regarded analogous to a beverage. The intention of the advertisement, however, was to promote a chunky, thick, filling soup which would require one to chew and use a fork to eat like other solid dishes. It is probable that the restaurant advertised their product with an understanding that soup is something one drinks, where in an English mindset it is not. The play-on-words resulted in a different nuance.

*Example5. A notice on the monitor of the Inokashira Line train car*

***Take care not to catch your hands in the door pockets!***

Example5 contains the tendencies of all three traits. The message is often visible in the train monitors above the doors or on stickers. Physically, it is impossible to “catch your hands” unless they were severed off one’s arms. The text has a grammatical disagreement in terms of active and passive voice. It is the *passengers* who get their hands *caught*, and the “doors” that “catch” your hands. In Japanese, the warning read; *tobukuro ni te wo hasamanai yowu gochuyui kudasai*. The wording *hasamanai* is the word *hasamu* (to bind something, to get caught) in its active voice, negated by the auxiliary *nai*. In this case, getting one’s hand caught in the doors would be described in the active voice in Japanese. It is likely that whoever wrote the text used the word “catch” in its active voice, translating the intended message in a Japanese grammatical context. Example5 demonstrates both Traits A and B, a direct translation of a concept derived from a Japanese mindset.

*Example6. A notice on the tubes in the UK*



Example6 is an “established expression” used in the UK. This shows that a

translation approach at the word level does not produce a fluent text in the translated language, making Example5 fit into Trait C. The accuracy or fluency of messages in English can depend on whether one knows the commonly used phrase or not. The sign above refers to the gap between the platform and door, but the same phrase could have been applied and translated as:

*Mind the door.*

#### **IV. Closing Remarks**

My analyses show that English texts in the LL of Tokyo likely to be awkward or incomprehensible were phrasings coming from a Japanese linguistic mindset, or put differently, driven by Japanese linguistic logic and perceptions. Whether the distinction between the two linguistic mindsets could be made or not is something I find as a challenge for English output.

As prior studies on LL in Japan have indicated, the distribution of foreign language in public areas has admittedly increased. Yet such phenomenon does not denote the existence of coherent and meaningful discourse of any language in the public sphere. It is likely that idiosyncratic texts exist in other language signs as well. Whether idiosyncratic foreign writings are a meaningful form of contemporary multilingual discourse is hitherto controversial and desires further discussion.

## V. References

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\*Photos of texts were taken by Kazuma Kobatake

\*Illustration on page 8 from OFFICIALCONFUSION.COM. Retrieved on October 30th, from: <http://officialconfusion.com/77/>