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Exploring the Role of English in Shaping the Linguistic Landscape: A Case Study of the Metropolitan area of Chiang Mai, Thailand

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of English as represented in signs in urban Chiang Mai, and explored English as used by government and nongovernment establishments for communication purposes and examined the linguistic landscape (LL) functions in the targeted areas. Over 600 signs were initially counted from three groups of places in the city. The study employed quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. The research instrument was an LL Sign Analysis Form. The results showed that the majority of the bilingual signs were English-Thai. While, English-Chinese-Thai formed the majority of the multilingual signs. Both official and nonofficial signs were mostly English-Thai. The main LL functions are information transmission and commercial functions. The findings suggest that English is increasingly becoming part of public sign usage in Thailand. These signs are also important in the distribution of information and the transmission of commercial interests.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, Signs, English

Introduction

As an outcome of world economic globalization, English has become a dominant world language. Global interests round the world are possible through communication. Over the 20th century, English became the dominant vehicle through which global interests could be spread (Crystal, 2001). In recent years, English as a dominant world language has been studied as part of the international Linguistic Landscape (henceforth 'LL'). The existence of English and other languages in textual forms is observable in various communities. For example, it is displayed on



street signs, shop names, commercial signs, official notices and so forth. Therefore, it is important to consider whether those visual written texts may indicate what languages are locally relevant, or illustrate evidence of what languages are becoming locally relevant (Hult, 2009; Kasanga, 2012). It seems likely that the use of languages in public signs reflected symbolically constructed in the public space (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006; Gorter & Cenoz, 2008) and can be used to describe the identity of a city and its inhabitants at a given time (Tan & Tan, 2015). LL is becoming a useful method to understand the evolution of urban space as a part of people's everyday experiences (Hult, 2014). Therefore, LL is the one theory that can represent the role of English and other languages and describe their roles in the community. There have been several studies of the linguistic landscapes of Thailand, for example, the LL study in Bangkok (Huebner, 2006; Siricharoen, 2016; Sutthinaraphan, 2016) and in Chiang Mai (Thongtong, 2016; Yanhong & Rungruang, 2013). These studies concentrated on nonofficial signs. To bridge the gap, this study was intended to contribute a new perspective to the LL research emerging in Thailand.

Purposes of the study

This study examined the role of English in shaping the linguistic landscape in urban Chiang Mai by exploring the existence of English and other languages represented on signs. This study focuses intensively on the difference of its establishment types between official and nonofficial signs, especially those signs containing English. In addition, this study also investigates the functions of the individual units of signs in urban Chiang Mai.

Research Questions

1. To what extent are English and other languages represented in signs in urban Chiang Mai and in which establishment types are the English language commonly used?
2. What functions does English serve in urban Chiang Mai?

Scope of the Study

This research adapted the sampling criteria of LL from Backhaus (2006) and the definition of LL as provided by Landry and Bourhis (1997). As a result, the targeted signs in this study were any piece of written text within a 'spatially definable frame' (Backhaus, 2006, p. 55), for example, shop signs, advertising billboards, public notices, road signs, street names, public signs, etc. The study focused on analysing the classification of the sign establishments in Chiang Mai which was adapted from Ben-Rafael et al., (2006). Moreover, the functions of the LL were adapted from the model of Litvinskaya (2010) and Yanhong & Rungruang (2013).



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Literature Review

Linguistic Landscape

The 'Linguistic Landscape' refers to all the language items that are visible in a particular part of the public space. According to Gorter (2018), the 'field of linguistics landscape study attempts to understand the motives, uses, ideologies, language varieties and contestations of multiple forms of languages as they are displayed in public spaces' (p. 4). While Landry and Bourhis (1997) defined LL is 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' (p. 25). Moreover, Pavlenko (2010) suggested that LL research investigates 'public uses of written languages' (p. 133). While, Shohamy and Waksman (2009) stated that 'the most unique feature of the LL is that it refers to the texts presented and displayed in the public space' (p. 314) which it can be founded in both top-down and bottom-up signs. English has become the communicational language in ever greater numbers of LL. English is displayed on signs in a number of tourist destinations and urban areas where it serves as lingua franca and as a communicative language between local people and non-locals (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Gorter, 2006; Huebner, 2006). In these respects, the concept of LL is an emerging and dynamic field of research in applied and sociolinguistics which studies displayed languages in the public space and is concerned with its social and communicative meanings.

Top-down and Bottom-up Signs

According to Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), the 'top-down' LL items, i.e. official signs include those distributed by governmental organizations, municipal, religious establishments (e.g. temples), educational, medical, national and public bureaucracies. Public signs of general interest include warning signs, rules and regulations, signs related to transport, public announcements or any advertisements initiated by government and street names. In contrast, 'Bottom-up' i.e. nonofficial signs refer to signs issued by nonofficial organizations and private business owners. For example, shop names of private companies, hotels, housing, tourist agencies, currency exchange agencies and private announcements are categorised as of the unofficial type. They may be influenced by language policy but mainly reflect individual preferences.

Functions of the Linguistic Landscape

There are four functions including informative, symbolic, mythological, and commercial generally revealed by LL. Firstly, the informative function of LL (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) relates



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to the presence of certain information on a specific sign. The dominance of a particular language may indicate that only the visible language will allow individuals to access the availability of the goods and services (Litvinskaya, 2013). Secondly, the symbolic function refers to the language choice exercised on public signage (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). This function conveys feelings of belonging, acceptance, and value to the in-group when one's own language is represented in the LL. When one's language is invisible, a negative social identity may develop by implying the language is not valued and has little status within society (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Reh, 2004). Furthermore, signs that are contained both universal and non-universal symbols are counted as having a symbolic function (Karwowski, 2006). Thirdly, Hicks (2002) added the mythological function of the LL. It relates to the LL in societies that have kept their native religion. In other words, the signs in this function serve as a connection to the past and a transmitter of the in-groups' traditional culture and religion through their associations with stories, myths, histories, and folklore by reflecting from its names or written texts. Lastly, the commercial function (Hornsby, 2008) refers to the signs that are used as a marketing strategy designed to attract customers. The signs that show the prices of products, or marketing campaigns were considered to have this function because the prices can be used to persuade passers-by to purchase their products.

Research Methodology

Sample area: the sample areas were divided into three groups within in Chiang Mai city. Firstly, the historical and cultural tourist attractions of Chedi Luang temple, Phra Singh Woramahawihan temple, Phantao temple, Chiang Man temple, Chiang Mai Historical Centre, and the Lanna Folklife Museum. The main Nimmanhemmin Road, Chiang Mai Sunday Walking Street, Tha Pae Gate, and Chiang Mai Night Bazaar were in the second group named recreational and shopping areas. Lastly, the public service places and institutions comprised of Chiang Mai Bus Terminal (Arcade), Chiang Mai International Airport, and Chiang Mai University. The main factor of consideration was the characteristics and functions of areas to explore whether the LL in each area reflects its functions, audiences, and representation. The samples in this study were 600 signs.

Research instrument: the LL Sign Analysis Form was adapted from Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), Landry and Bourhis (1997), Hicks (2002), and Hornsby (2008). A pilot study was conducted to ensure a framework with defined terms of LL, established the feasibility and usefulness of the data collection, and certified any necessary revisions before it was used with the research samples. The two experts evaluated it through Item-Objective Congruence Index (IOC) to establish content validity.

Data Collection: the process of data collection covered three steps, namely preliminary, monitoring, and formalizing in 2019 for assuring all signs in the targeted areas were collected.



The targeted signs are considered according to any piece of written text within a definable frame. Monolingual Thai signs were not included in this study. Each sign was counted as one item, regardless of its size or type. Bilingual or multilingual signs are counted if one of the languages was English.

Data Analysis: this study employed descriptive statistics, namely frequency and percentage. Additionally, axial coding was interpreted using a content analysis. The content of each sign was coded into different categories, which are indicated according to the context of LL functions.

Results

The presence of English and other languages

Within the three targeted areas, the majority of the signs were bilingual English-Thai scripts. While, 40% (238 signs) of the 600 signs were written in multilingual scripts. The remaining 58 signs or 10% were monolingual i.e. English script. In terms of the variety of displayed languages, the majority 43% (258 signs) was written in English-Thai, while English-Chinese-Thai signs occupied 30% (181 signs). The remaining displayed languages were in English with other languages 10% (61 signs): for example, 'Kammüang'¹, Japanese, Russian, Khmer, Korean, Myanmar, French, Arabic, Hebrew, Spanish, and Bahasa Indonesian. Interestingly, 58 signs (10%) were monolingual English. The signs written in bilingual English and Chinese formed the smallest group of signs, 7% (42 signs).

The common establishment types of signs found in urban Chiang Mai

While the presence of English and other languages was revealed, the diversity of languages becomes more manifest when official signs and nonofficial signs are compared as shown in Table 1. The English language was commonly found in signs for both government and non-government establishments. Among the signs examined, 376 (63%) of 600 signs were nonofficial signs. The remaining signs i.e. 224 (37%) were official signs. With respect to Table 1, English and Thai were the most frequently used languages. They were used on 258 signs. While English combined with Chinese tend to be less frequently used (42 signs or 7%). However, English-Chinese-Thai (181 signs or 30%) seem to be more frequently found than English with other languages (61 signs or approximately 10%) and monolingual English (58 signs or 10%), respectively.

¹Kammüang or Lanna dialect is a dialect of the Northern Thai people. It is one of the four major regional dialects of Thailand, namely Thaiklang or Standard Thai, Lao, Kammüang, and Paktay (Smalley, 1994) which are related to each other and are the dominant dialects in each of the four geographical regions, including the Central provinces, Northeast, North, and South, respectively. Kammüang is significantly and systematically different from Standard Thai in sound system, grammar, and vocabulary.



Table 1: Chiang Mai signs by displayed language and establishments

Displayed Language/ Establishment	English only	English - Thai	English - Chinese	English - Chinese - Thai	English – Other languages	Total
Official	12 (5%)	112 (50%)	5 (2%)	69 (31%)	26 (12%)	224 (37%)
Nonofficial	46 (12%)	146 (39%)	37 (10%)	112 (30%)	35 (9%)	376 (63%)
Total	58 (10%)	258 (43%)	42 (7%)	181 (30%)	61 (10%)	600 (100%)

Furthermore, the study demonstrated that there were some different frequencies of the languages used on official and nonofficial signs. English – Thai (112 signs or 50%) were the majority of languages used on official signs. While English with Chinese (5 signs or 2%) were found to be less frequently used on official signs. Government agencies produced 63 (31%) of the official signs as trilingual (Thai, Chinese and English). The residuary 12% (26 signs) was written in English and other languages such as Japanese, French, Korean, and Kammüang scripts. Twelve of official signs (5%) were monolingual English. In contrast, all other signs were categorized as nonofficial signs. Out of 376 nonofficial signs, bilingual English-Thai was the most frequently used on nonofficial signs (39% or 146 signs). This result is similar to the first ranked language used on official signs. Nevertheless, the least language used on nonofficial signs was English with other languages (35 signs or 9%). The remaining languages used on nonofficial signs were English-Chinese-Thai (112 signs or 30%), monolingual English (46 signs or 12%) and English - Chinese (37 signs or 10%), respectively.

The Linguistic Landscape Functions

The results manifested that the majority LL function 366 (61%) of 600 signs served the informative function. These signs indicated certain information for audiences for particular purposes, for example rules and regulations, instructions, shop names and related information, addresses, contact numbers, business hours, available services, etc. Secondly, the common function is the commercial function as demonstrated by 118 signs (20%). All of the 118 signs contained language that was suitable for promoting or marketing products or services, for instance, showing the prices of products, highlighted with the use of different sized font, bright colours, etc. Moreover, the third-ranked function found in the research areas is the symbolic function (70 signs or 12%). Monolingual English signs were mostly categorized in this function which is frequently found in recreational and shopping areas. On the other hand, several signs of research data can be described as a mythological function. Out of 600 signs, there are 46 signs (7%) which performed a mythological function. The signs served as a focal point for various traditional stories, myths, and norms that are part of the Thai traditional culture and religion which is mostly found in historical and cultural tourist attractions.



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Discussion

From the results of the study, it can be noticeable that there are a considerable number of codemixing signs, especially on signs containing Thai script with English words. These signs were designed to communicate with not only foreigners but also Thais who are assumed to understand the English language. These results corresponded to Yanhong and Rungruang's study (2013) that 'English is becoming the dominant language on signs' (p. 62) in various types of codemixing; including lexical borrowing, orthography, pronunciation and syntax levels. This view also supports the findings of Huebner (2006), who emphasized the emergence of a developing form of Thai-English, and that English itself appears to be a language of wider communication in the LL of Bangkok. Moreover, it seems likely that English was commonly found on signs in the public spaces of Chiang Mai. The existence of English as represented on signs of this study reflected the importance of English as a tool of international communication for various purposes. This phenomenon happened because Chiang Mai became one of the top five popular tourist destinations of Thailand where around 10 million tourists were welcomed in 2018 (Tourism Authority of Thailand, n.d.) and English was used as a medium of communication. Therefore, it is possible to argue that English is more widely used by Thais than in the past as compared with the study of Smalley (1994). He suggested that 'English messages are directed at tourists and others from abroad' (Smalley, 1994, p. 204). However, almost thirty years later, Thai society in Chiang Mai has changed and is gradually becoming more international as may be seen in the greater use of English, Chinese and other foreign languages. Interestingly, bilingual English and Thai were the most commonly used languages on both official and nonofficial signs. This demonstrates that both the government and private sectors are conscious of the need to internationalise their city. Furthermore, the salience of each displayed language should be taken into account. The finding suggests that English was displayed in the most outstanding points, including a larger font size, a more striking colour and a more prominent position. According to Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), the language in outstanding points is considered as the first language. As a result, English appears the dominant foreign language used on signs in Chiang Mai. This is different from the situation in Tokyo where languages other than Japanese are considered to include on signs designated by official language policies (Backhaus, 2006). On the contrary, the eligible languages used on official signs in Chiang Mai are English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Cambodian, Myanmar and French which were similar to nonofficial signs. These displayed languages reflect the increasing level of multilingualism in Chiang Mai and local society. Furthermore, the official language policy of the country has become more inclusive between nationality and internationality over the years



compared with Huebner's study (2006). However, Thai is still used on signs as the official national language and English is the dominant international language for wider communication purposes.

In terms of the LL functions, the majority LL function serves the informative function. Both official and nonofficial bodies utilized English-containing signs for informative functions. Although the informative and commercial functions have indicated some overlapping features as claimed by Yanhong and Rungruang (2013). They concluded that advertising signs were determined to carry on commercial functions. With this respect, the commercial function in this study focused on signs that highlighted the marketing strategies for products, promotions, advertising slogans, and the prices of products (Hornsby, 2008; Leeman & Modan, 2009; Yanhong & Rungruang, 2013). Not only nonofficial owners, but also governors used this symbolic function. This function conveys feelings of acceptance and value to the in-group when one's language is visible, a positive social identity may develop by implying that the language is valued and has prestige within that society (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Reh 2004; Shohamy, 2006). In this respect, the existence of monolingual English signs, tends to contribute to a positive social identity and may denote a valued language with prestige status in Chiang Mai society. Therefore, monolingual English signs performed a symbolic function that reflects the role of English in shaping the LL in Chiang Mai. Lastly, the mythological function is mostly found on signs of temples i.e. temple names which frequently written in Thai-English-Lanna script where local Lanna identity is preserved. Additionally, temples' instructions were also noted in mythological function, for example, this sentence was found in front of the temple *'Please dress politely, The temple is Buddhism's honourable site, Please show your respect by dressing neatly'*. This instruction seems likely to have an informative function; however, upon closer analysis they emphasised their mythological value as compared to their informative function, which linked to traditional culture. This result is supported to Yanhong & Rungruang (2013) in the respect that the Lanna script was found in the signs of temples and street names in Chiang Mai University and it seems to serve as a transmitter of Lana culture.

Conclusion

The research findings demonstrated that the dominance of targeted signs was bilingual English-Thai, while, English-Chinese-Thai were the majority of the multilingual signs. Furthermore, both official and nonofficial signs were mostly written in English-Thai. The main LL functions was informative and commercial functions. It is possible to conclude that the increasing number of signs that contained English may represent two possible roles. Firstly, English was used as a tool catering for the international modernity atmosphere. Secondly, English was used as a tool for attracting people both Thais and non-Thais who are able to understand English and, therefore,



to communicate with wider audiences. This study is limited in that it investigated the usage of signs in a particular place at a particular time. The researcher was involved in observing the LL in the local situation as a passive role in the study. Further research in this field is necessary to test the conclusions drawn here and to provide answers of a broader perspective. Further research may include interviews with the owners of these signs in order to assess their perspectives.

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