

Linguistic Landscape in Japan and its Contribution to Globalization

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Introduction

*Sign, sign, everywhere a sign,
Blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind.
Do this, Don't do that.
Can't you read the sign?*
(Title: Signs by: Five Man Electrical Band)

Globalization has brought the world closer together through economic, culture and language at a speed unprecedented in history. English has become the lingua franca and one of the dominant world languages which can be seen in signs and advertising around the world. These signs are part of the Linguistic Landscape (LL) of an environment which provide insight into our daily lives and also as a valuable language learning resource. The research of LL comes from various fields including sociolinguistics, communication studies, economics, psychology or education to name a few.

LL was first introduced by Landry and Bourhis and is defined as: “The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combine to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration.” (Landry and Bourhis, 1997 p.9) These artifacts such as signs and clothing items become significant when they have conflicting meanings between languages or social norms.

This paper will examine the effects of globalization on current language use, focusing on product and shop names and fashion using English in the local environment of Japan.

Literature Review

The expansion of English is directly connected to the occurrence of globalization. English and its position in the world today is unique. No other language in the past can claim as many users as English. Dewey (2007) observes:

Although there are, and have previously been, other international languages, the case of English is different in fundamental ways: for the extent of its diffusion geographically; for the enormous cultural diversity of the speakers who use it; and for the infinitely varied domain in which it is formed and purposes it serves. (p. 333)

Mobility, closely related to globalization is important to assess in order to understand the role of multilingualism in a certain area. This refers not only to the physical mobility but mobility through new technologies. For example, the internet brings the world to our fingertips without leaving our home. Blommaert, (2010) describes multilingualism as the linguistic changes across time and space. Blommaert's categorization of space refers not only to a physical space but to a more symbolic space in which selected social, cultural and customary values are represented (p.6). Fairclough (2007) argues that the representations of globalization also aid in the complex process of shaping globalization (p.2).

Globalization, migration, and the spread of English created a great challenge for those who study language and society. Critical for sociolinguists is *language transfer*, in which the application of linguistic features from one language to another are combined. When this happens not only the form transfers but the function as well. This can create new terms or role in the new environment. For example, Pennycook (2003), researched how the language of African American youths from the Bronx created new meanings, new effects when it was transferred to Japan. This transfer defined the hip-hop culture of Japan with new styles and culture.

There have been several studies conducted on the LL of diverse areas around the globe. These have included an in-depth study on the transformation of Chinatown in Washington D.C. from lower to upper middle class (Leeman & Modan, 2009), the commercial discourse and socioeconomic changes in Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin (Papen, 2012), to the commodification of Russian in a market in New Delhi (Suryanarayan, 2016). Landry and Bourhis (2007) posits that LLs are confirmed by "the language of public road signs, advertising, billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings" (p.24).

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The artifacts described in this paper are categorized by Blommaert's (2010) three major effects of contact:

- Semiotically as a sign of power and prestige rather than semantically.
- The coining of new hybrid words or portmanteaus.
- Language resulting in truncated or erroneous usage.

These effects are often seen in Japan with little regard of meaning, grammar or spelling. Not only on signs or advertising but also on the clothes they wear. Similarly, to westerners that get a Kanji character tattoo for aesthetic or stylish reasons without knowing the full meaning of what it means. This “linguistic fashion” also discussed in this paper, can be humorous, a social statement or pop culture but often can be obscene or worn without concern of comprehension or semantic meaning.

In the light of these categories, this paper explores some language examples from the local surroundings of Japan and will demonstrate connections between globalization, multilingualism, and mobility.

Languages used for their semiotic rather than semantic value



Figure 1

Title : For Professional **Sanity** for Toilet

Origin : University restroom, Kobe, Japan

Language : English

This product is an odor neutralizing gel beads used to eliminate unwanted odors. This example of semiotic language use is possibly referring to the sanitation of the air that the beads provide. The semantic definition of sanity refers to the ability to behave in a normal rational manner. This unintentionally becomes a play on words in that the product helps users keep their “sanity” in an awkward place with uncomfortable odors.



Figure 2

Title : Big Wood

Origin : West Kobe, Japan

Language : English

Big Wood is the name of a furniture outlet store that sells slightly damaged goods. (<http://www.big-wood.co.jp>) As displayed in figure 2, Big Wood is above the Japanese Katakana of ビッグウッド (BIGGU UDDO). Often English is not written for practical purposes as to help a foreigner but as for fashion or semiotically. Upon asking the shop attendant about the meaning of the sign, the shopkeeper had no idea. The shop had an abundance of large pieces of furniture (e.g. beds, cabinets, tables, etc.) that would explain the use of the phrase. It is very unlikely that the owner of the shop recognizes the American slang of the term. According the online Urban Dictionary the definition is: “Having or possessing a larger than average penis. Usually meaning your (sic) hung like a horse, or it tickles your knee, or you even have to tuck it in your sock.”

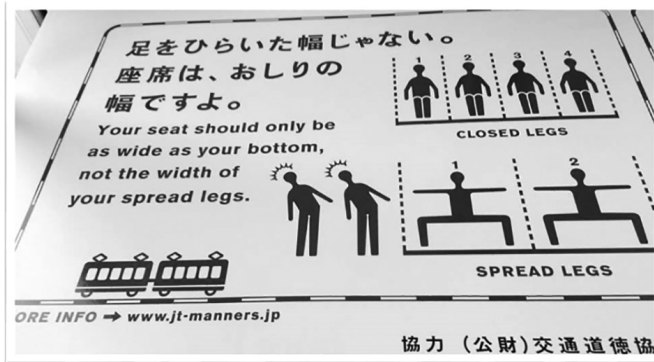


Figure 3

Title : Spread Legs

Origin : Osaka Loop Line train, Osaka, Japan

Language : English & Japanese

There is a lot going on in the photo that was taken on the city loop line train in Osaka. There is a train, people looking surprised, with English and Japanese writing. This is a sitting etiquette guide for the train with proper and improper sitting positions along with an explicit explanation. The guide provides specific measurements (wide as your bottom) to insure the amount of space taken.

The English is not truncated or erroneous but odd. The language is direct and specific, unlike usual Japanese, which is subtle and polite. One reason may be because this sign is in Osaka where people are said to be friendlier and straightforward. According to a Kansai native, Tokyoites might find this odd and confusing. This courteous sign stems from the problem of people; especially men sitting with their legs wide open taking a large space. This position is seen quite often on the trains, men sitting in a dominant, self-possessed position with little regard to other passengers. As the website address at the bottom subtly points out this is a manner issue. However, this sign comes across as almost humorous as it makes one contemplate the size of their own bottom. If this was not on the train it would be even more confusing, but the context can be understood if on a train.

The coining of new words resulting from the hybridization of two languages

The following two examples are portmanteaus, a linguistic blend of words combining to form a new word. Both examples are popular beverages in Japan.



Figure 4

Title : Calpis Soda

Origin : Yamoya (liquor shop), Kobe, Japan

Language : Japanese (romaji)

Figure 4 is **Calpis** (カルピス *Karupisu*) a Japanese soft drink, manufactured by **Calpis Co., Ltd.** (カルピス株式会社 *Karupisu Kabushiki*), headquartered in Tokyo. The beverage has a light, somewhat milky, and slightly acidic flavor, similar to plain or vanilla-flavored yogurt. According to the Tusnagu Japan website: “Cal” is taken from calcium, and “Pis” is taken from the Sanskrit word “Salpis,” which is one of the five tastes described in Buddhism. Nevertheless, the name has a strange sound to westerners as it can be heard as “cow piss”. This would suggest the reason why it is marketed as “Calpico” outside of Japan.



Figure 5

Title : Pocari Sweat

Origin : Vending machine, Kobe, Japan

Language : Japanese (romaji)

Pocari Sweat (figure 5) is a mild-tasting, relatively light, non-carbonated sweet beverage and is advertised as an “ion supply sports drink”. It has a mild grapefruit flavor with little aftertaste. At first glance “pocari sweat” seems to be a new hybrid word. However, hybrid words by definition need to have parts that have meaning in and of themselves and these are two different words.

This first part of this new word “pocari” according to the manufacturer does not have a meaning: the word was coined for its light, bright sound. The second part “sweat” or perspiration tends to have a putting off or humorous connotation in western cultures.

Truncated or language use errors



Figure 6

Title : Ractis

Origin : Neighbor's car, Kobe, Japan

Language : Japanese (Romaji)

This is a photo of my neighbor's car taken last week. Japanese cars often have names to express a good feeling for driving and enjoyment. The Toyota Ractis is a subcompact car produced by Toyota and Kanto Auto Works. The name "Ractis" is derived from "Run", "Activity" and "Space". (Toyota website. <http://toyota.jp/faq/>) The words are not erroneous, but a hybrid acronym that makes English speakers grimace when they see it. This is ironic as Japan can be a "racist" country to find a word that sounds and looks like a discriminatory word. Toyota also has a MPV called Isis, which came out before the start of the Islamic State (Isis). This vehicle was named for Isis, a goddess in Ancient Egyptian religious beliefs, whose worship spread throughout the Greco-Roman world. Both of these car names do not sit well with westerners because of their similarity to negative words or events in English language and culture.



Figure 7

Title : Excuse me Japanese People Only

Origin : Higashimon Street, Kobe, Japan

Language : English

The author took this photo on a popular drinking street in Kobe. On the street there are advertising and menus for bars and restaurants in a particular building. This sign is for a Soul / R&B music bar that was on the street in front of the building. This sign is a blatant racist request for foreigners not to enter. The term “Excuse Me” is improperly used. Japanese often interchange I’m Sorry and Excuse Me as the term in Japanese (SUMIMASEN) can be used interchangeably. Because of the poor English it is difficult to understand the reason or meaning of this sign. Giving the bar the benefit of the doubt, the sign might be trying to say: In this bar we only speak Japanese and cannot cater to foreigners. It is likely that the bar has had problems with foreigners in the past and would not like to deal with them. The sign being in English itself is misleading, “SOUL BAR”. Signs that are in English attract foreigners and can be perceived as an invitation to enter, contrary to the actual meaning. When I entered the establishment to inquire about the sign, I was politely ushered out with no explanation but plenty of bowing. Although this kind of xenophobia sign is dwindling, they are a product of the prevailing nationalistic and conformist attitudes based on social and legal authorities. (Because “racism doesn’t exist in Japan” - everyone’s the same, except for those people who aren’t.) The Japanese see themselves as all being just one race, ergo, there is no

“difference”. Yet there are differences, for example, those born to mixed race parents who still confront inclusive practices against them (Kimura, 2020).

Linguist Fashion

The photos in this section were taken of students at a Women’s University in Osaka where the author was teaching. The artifacts depict a form of “linguist fashion” that is popular in Japan. The term linguistic fashion refers to the visibility and salience of languages on clothes. Similar to “linguistic landscape” clothes may serve important informational and symbolic functions as a marker of the relative power and status of a language in the region (Landry and Bourhis, 1997). There is an abundance of linguistic fashion in Japan from the traditional brand named (e.g. Chanel, Adidas or Benetton) to the truncated or inappropriate, which we see here. Figure 8 has Barely Legal written on it, with a picture of a sexy girl. Barely Legal is the name of an American adult magazine targeted primarily at heterosexual men. When asked about the T-shirt the student said she had purchased it in a popular clothing shop and liked it because it was cute and fashionable and she did not know the meaning.



Figure 8

Title : Barely Legal

Origin : Osaka Women’s University, Osaka, Japan

Language : English



Figure 9

Title : Mary Jane

Origin : Osaka Women's University, Osaka, Japan

Language : English

Figure 9 has the words Legalize in large capital letters in bold pink. Followed by Mary Jane, Weed Need Seed and at the bottom Freedom Smoke-it. The student had no idea of the meaning or the ramification the context. This shirt sends a message that marijuana should be legalized. However, in Japan drugs (including Mary Jane) are frowned upon socially and legally. Japan has strict laws against the possession and usage of drugs.

When it was explained to the student, she was shocked and said it was bought at a well-known shop and she liked it because it was cute and colorful.

In both figure 8 and 9 the form of linguistic fashion has been taken to the extreme and would be considered rude or offensive in a university classroom in America. Japanese innocently select and wear nonsensical English phrases without comprehending the meaning or consequences it brings. It demonstrated that in Japan the power of fashion and originality overrides the semantic meaning and that globalization has not filtered down into Japanese society as in the rest of the world. This is not to say that this faux pas does not exist in other places around the world as they surely do. This freedom of fashion expression is abundant in Japan and is a pleasant change from the stiff and stigma attached to casual dress codes of the states.

Conclusion

Are these examples of Japan's English evolution or bad advertising and fashion abominations? In 2007, after lengthy and intense debated, the MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) finalized a procedure to introduce English education in elementary schools starting in 2011 (Butler, 2007). The proposal was overwhelming support by parents to produce a more globally competitive work force and better employment opportunities in the future. Despite its popularity, English continues to waver between two extremities. The expansion of globalization and intercultural relations or the opposing view: "English takes time away from Japanese language study and citizenship education...national unity and Japanese identity are being undermined by a focus on English." (Yamagami and Tollefson 2011)

Fortunately, the trend is currently expanding globalization with the effect of enabling communities to develop and maintain themselves with a greater ease across national borders. The examples of English usage in this paper may provide evidence of this trend and for more positive attention to English knowledge in Japan.

The LL around us is constantly changing as trends and cultures combine and collide to provide creative artifacts to explore and expose. Japan is a great place to find scores of linguistics artifacts that entertain and shock our senses. The examples in this paper demonstrate the effects that globalization has on language and culture in society and our lives.

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Abstract

Through technology and the Internet, the world has become more mobile and multilingual, with more frequent language mixing. In his book, *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization* (Cambridge), Blommaert (2010) maintains that today's language exposure has many effects on language use.

This paper examines the sociolinguistic phenomenon of linguistic landscapes (LL) found in the Kansai region of Japan. The artifacts are photographs of shops, advertisements, products and fashion that demonstrated the impact of globalization on current language usage. The contact languages of the artifacts are English and Japanese reflecting the results of modern culture and language contact in the age of multilingualism and mobility.

These examples will be described using Blommaert's three-part classification system; (1) Semiotically as a sign of power and prestige. (2) Hybrid words. (3) Truncated language. Both Blommaert (2010) and Fairclough (2007) state that language is not merely a representation of globalization, but an active participant. This paper will raise critical consciousness by first noticing the linguistic and cultural imbalances and contradictions in everyday social and cultural practices that are taken for granted, and to critically reflect on the values attached to the artifacts.