

# A Semiotic Analysis of the Linguistic Landscape of World Heritage Sites: A Case Study of Himeji Castle

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## 1. Introduction

Landry and Bourhis (1997), in one of the pioneering studies in the discipline of linguistic landscape (hereafter LL), have defined the notion of LL as “[t]he language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration” (p. 25). The publication of this foundational work in the field has significantly accelerated the study of LL, attracting considerable attention across a wide range of academic disciplines. To date, numerous studies have been conducted from diverse perspectives, including sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistic vitality or EV, communicative strategies, and language education, among others (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Backhaus, 2006; Lazdia & Marten, 2009; Amos, 2014; Cunningham & King, 2021; Chen, 2022). Furthermore, case studies of specific territories or communities have also been extensively conducted, such as Backhaus’s (2006) examination of the linguistic landscape in Tokyo from a multilingual or multicultural perspective, Sheng & Buchanan’s (2022) analysis of an ancient waterfront town in China, and Fu’s (2023) brief survey of an English-speaking community in the University District of Seattle, USA. However, studies on specific cases of World Heritage sites in Japan remain insufficient and call for further advancement.

This study analyzes the LL of Himeji Castle, a World Cultural Heritage site, from a semiotic perspective within a theoretical framework. Semiotics, or geo-semiotics, as defined by Scollon and Scollon (2003), refers to “the study of social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world” (p. 2). In simple terms, semiotics conceptualizes various aspects, including spatial and temporal practices, the properties of public signs, their meanings, and how these elements interact with readers of the LL (Sheng & Buchanan, 2022). This framework is crucial for understanding how public signs are not just linguistic texts but also carry social and cultural significance based on their placement and context within a specific environment. In this study, a mixed use of different types of public signs is particularly observed and discussed, with specific attention to three pairs of contrasting examples in the LL of Himeji Castle. The semiotic approach is thus regarded as a practical and

effective methodology for identifying the distinctive features of the LL, as it takes into account not only the text itself but also the potential interactions or communication between readers and the physical and social environments in which public signs are situated.

This research paper aims to explore the distinct features of the LL of Himeji Castle, the only World Cultural Heritage site in Hyogo Prefecture, ultimately seeking to provide a deeper understanding of how language usage in public signs functions within cultural heritage sites. The paper begins with an introduction in Section One, which provides background information on the concept of LL within related fields, as well as a theoretical framework for the case study of the LL at Himeji Castle. Then, Section Two clarifies the research methodology, including basic facts about the research subject along with an overview of the fieldwork survey, such as the plan, design, and procedures. Section Three examines the primary characteristics of the LL at Himeji Castle from three perspectives: a combined use of professional and heart-warming public signs, a blend of immersed and inconsistent public signs, and a mix of physical, electronic, and QR- or AR-equipped public signs. Finally, Section Four concludes with an interim summary of the semiotic, multilingual, and multicultural aspects of the LL at Himeji Castle, thereby laying the foundation for future studies on the LL of World Cultural Heritage sites or, more broadly, on World Heritage sites in Japan.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Quick Facts about Himeji Castle**

This section provides basic facts about the subject of this research, Himeji Castle, a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site in Hyogo Prefecture, Japan. Himeji Castle was inscribed on the World Heritage list in 1993, alongside other sites such as Buddhist Monuments in the Horyu-ji Area in Nara, Shirakami-Sanchi in Aomori and Akita, and Yakushima in Kagoshima (UNESCO). The castle, also known as “Shirasagi-jo” (White Egret Castle), “remained intact through the Meiji-era modernisation when other castles were destroyed as a legacy of feudalism, and it survived the plans of a property developer to demolish it and the bombing of the surrounding area during World War II” (Dougill, 2024, p. 33). Dougill further notes that “[e]very aspect of the castle was built with defence in mind,” and that “even today, with signboards pointing the way, tourists can find the layout baffling” (Dougill, 2024, p. 30). Further, according to Himeji City, where the castle is located, approximately 1.48 million people visited the castle in fiscal year 2023, with 30.6% of them being foreign tourists, marking an annual record high of 452,300 inbound visitors. Recently, the national treasure’s admission fee hike for foreign visitors sparked public attention and discussions around February 2025 (The Mainichi).

## 2.2 The Overview of the Field Research

In this section, we provide an overview of the fieldwork planned for this research. The fieldwork was designed by the author and implemented on February 27, 2025, at Himeji Castle in Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture. Photography was the primary method used to record public signboards, forming the central portion of the elementary data for this research. During the fieldwork, the author randomly took fifty photographs of semiotic and textual signs at Himeji Castle and its immediate surroundings. In this study, a photograph with multiple public signs is statistically counted as one for the sake of technical processing convenience; accordingly, the analysis focuses on the most eye-catching sign of all. An overview of the data reveals that 96% of these signs (48 out of 50) were bilingual or multilingual<sup>1</sup>, 76% (38 out of 50) were physical signs rather than electronic signs, and 12% (6 out of 50) and 8% (4 out of 50) of the signs were equipped with an AR marker and a QR code, respectively, to allow tourists to further explore and enjoy.

**Table 1: The outline of the LL at Himeji Castle in this study**

Type of the LL	Percentage
Bilingual or multilingual	96%
Monolingual	4%
Physical	76%
Electronic	4%
QR-equipped	8%
AR-equipped	12%

## 3. Results and Discussions

### 3.1 Combination of Professional and Heart-warming Signs

This section focuses on one of the distinct features of the LL at Himeji Castle: a combination of professional and heart-warming public signs. One of the photographs collected in this study (not reproduced in this paper<sup>2</sup>) contains the textual content extracted in (1)–(3) below, together with the semiotic elements of a bold red circle and bar, and serves as a representative example of professional public signage. Professional public signs typically convey straightforward messages related to prohibited actions by law<sup>3</sup>, with the use of red color signifying alertness or warning. This ensures that the message is easily noticed and understood by the public. On the other hand, Photograph No. 10, i.e., Fig. 1 below, presents a combination of professional and heart-warming signs at the same outdoor location. With the personified Japanese linguistic expression “呼吸” in (5), literally meaning “to breathe” and translated into English as (6) by ChatGPT, Photograph No. 10 serves as a typical example of heart-warming public signs and helps significantly reduce the potential

mental resistance from readers of these signs, contributing to a more harmonious sightseeing environment. Another heart-warming public sign features a Japanese expression, “しろまるひめからのお願い,” literally “a request from Princess Shiromaru<sup>4</sup>,” alongside the primary message, “立入禁止,” literally “keep out.” The total number of similar heart-warming public signs recorded in this study was two<sup>5</sup>.

- (1) NO SMOKING
- (2) NO OPEN FLAME
- (3) NO HAZARDOUS MATERIALS
- (4) 立入禁止 KEEP OUT
- (5) 桜は根で呼吸します 踏まないでね  
((4) & (5), Photograph No. 10, as shown in Fig. 1 below; underlined by the author)
- (6) Cherry trees breathe through their roots. Please do not step on them.  
(Translation of (5) by ChatGPT, March 5, 2025; underlined by the author)
- (7) しろまるひめからのお願い 立入禁止 KEEP OUT

(Photograph No. 3)



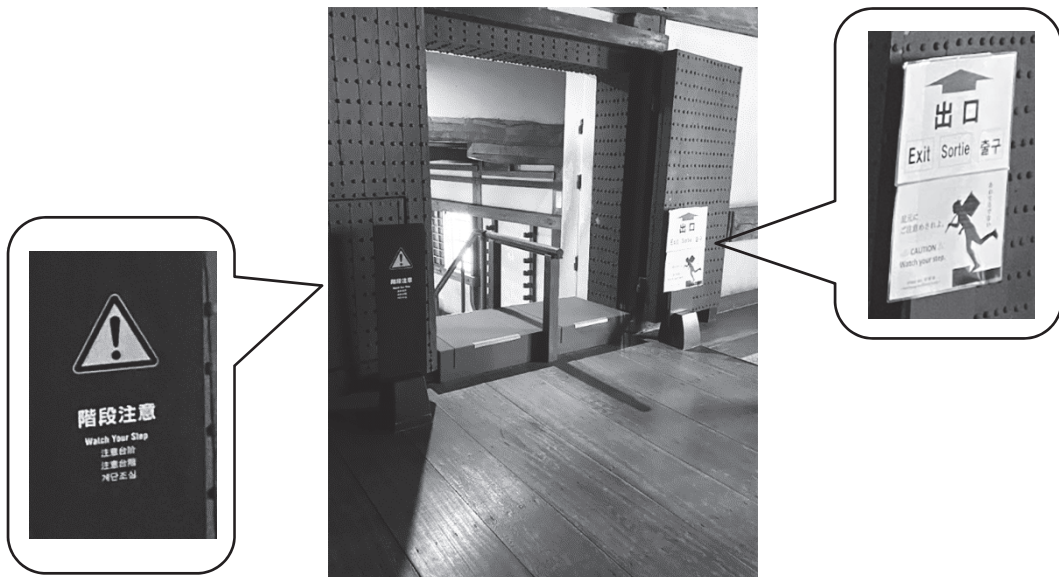
**Fig. 1 The LL of Himeji Castle: a combination of professional and heart-warming public signage, Photograph No. 10, taken by the author on February 27, 2025**

### 3.2 Combination of Immersed and Inconsistent Signs

In this section, we examine another unique feature of the LL at Himeji Castle: a blend of immersed and inconsistent public signs. As the name suggests, immersed public signs, in terms of size, color, design and so forth, serve as an integral and consistent part of the environment in which they are located. Moreover, immersed signs contribute to increased tourist satisfaction with their touring experience,

especially in historical and cultural environments like Himeji Castle, by minimizing off-the-mark interruptions from incompatible elements. In contrast, inconsistent signs are noticeably different from their surroundings—whether indoor or outdoor—in terms of color, size, and design. The primary purpose of inconsistent signs is to warn readers or tourists of potential danger, as illustrated in Photograph No. 38, or Fig. 2 below. In Fig. 2, due to the poorly illuminated surroundings inside the main keep of the castle along the steep stairs leading to the exit, there is an urgent need to warn tourists. This warning is effectively and naturally conveyed through the immersed signs (on the left side of Photograph No. 38) in a gentle manner as in (8) below, and through the inconsistent signs (on the right side of Photograph No. 38) in an aggressive manner as in (9) below, despite both signs displaying similar linguistic and semiotic content. The total number of the inconsistent signs photographed and recorded in this study was ten, with the purposes of warning (2 signs), restriction (3 signs), reminding (3 signs), and special exhibition (2 signs), respectively.

- (8) 階段注意 Watch Your Step. (the left side of Photograph No. 38)  
(9) 出口 Exit 足元にご注意めされよ<sup>6</sup> CAUTION Watch your step.  
(the right side of Photograph No. 38)



**Fig. 2 The LL of Himeji Castle: a blend of immersed and inconsistent signs.**  
Photograph No. 38, taken by the author on February 27, 2025

### 3.3 Combination of Physical, Electronic, and QR- and AR-equipped<sup>7</sup> Signs

In this section, another notable feature of the LL at Himeji Castle is explored: a blend of physical, electronic, and QR- or AR-equipped public signs, illustrated with specific examples. While physical public signs account for as high as 76% of all

signage<sup>8</sup>, electronic public signs have emerged as an integral part of the LL system at Himeji Castle. Electronic signs are characterized by their ability to easily accommodate changes and additions of information, with much fewer space limitations compared to physical signage. Additionally, AR-equipped public signs, as shown in Fig. 3, or Photograph No. 33, which represent 12% of all signage in this study<sup>9</sup>, and QR-equipped signs, which represent 6% of all signs, have been introduced to further enhance visitor satisfaction and enjoyment. These innovative signs make full use of tourists' smartphones, providing an engaging and interactive experience that blends modern technology with traditional displays.



**Fig. 3 The LL of Himeji Castle: a mix of physical and AR-equipped signs.  
Photograph No. 33, taken by the author on February 27, 2025**

#### 4. An Interim Conclusion

In conclusion, although this study is based on a limited number of signs and photographs, the LL system at Himeji Castle illustrates a dynamic interplay of traditional and modern signage strategies that enhance both the functional and affective dimensions of the tourist experience. As a pilot study, this paper demonstrates that the coexistence of professional and heart-warming signs contributes to creating an inviting atmosphere, while the integration of both immersive and inconsistent signs helps maintain safety without compromising the castle's aesthetic integrity. Furthermore, the introduction of electronic and QR- and AR-equipped public signs marks a significant step toward modernizing the visitor experience, making full use of contemporary technologies to engage and inform tourists. This thoughtful blend of physical, electronic, and immersive elements not only meets the practical needs of navigation and safety but also contributes to a more enjoyable and memorable visit, particularly for inbound tourists. By balancing heritage preservation with innovation, Himeji Castle has successfully created an environment where visitors can appreciate both the cultural richness of the site and the convenience of modern technology,

making it a model for other historical sites nationwide. In future studies, we will investigate additional types of mixed signage, including combinations of indoor and outdoor signs, movable and immovable signs, semi-permanent and temporary signs, as well as printed and handwritten signs. Furthermore, we will examine the LL systems of other World Heritage sites—particularly those in Japan—in order to reconfirm and more clearly underscore the unique characteristics of the LL system at Himeji Castle through comparative analysis.

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- <sup>1</sup> In addition to the multilingual public signs at the site, the multicultural aspect of Himeji Castle is further emphasized by the availability of the castle's pamphlets in 20 languages.
  - <sup>2</sup> This photograph is part of the author's field data but is not included in the paper due to space limitations.
  - <sup>3</sup> "NO SMOKING," as an interpersonal message, is considered too direct by some researchers and could sometimes cause unnecessary offense to readers of the public signs or tourists. Thus, the author recommends an alternate sign, "Smoking Prohibited by Law," or "Smoking is Prohibited by Law," as can be seen universally in Hawaii, as observed during the author's stay there in March 2025. The latter emphasizes the objective fact rather than interpersonal directions or instructions. Discussion of the above perspective is not fully developed in this paper due to space limitations.
  - <sup>4</sup> According to *Visit Himeji*, "Shiromaruhime was chosen as the winner of a public contest for a character that could represent 'our hometown of Himeji.'" (Retrieved July 14, 2025, from <https://visit-himeji.com/en/about/>)
  - <sup>5</sup> In this pilot study, heart-warming public signs in English were not captured during the data collection process, an issue that will constitute a crucial focus in future research.
  - <sup>6</sup> The use of the honorific verb form "めされよ," a slightly old-fashioned or formal version of polite Japanese, is not elaborated on in this paper due to space limitations.
  - <sup>7</sup> For further information on AR-equipped signs, refer to the Himeji Castle official website (Retrieved August 27, 2025, from <https://www.himejicastle.jp/en/ar.html>).
  - <sup>8</sup> Physical signs equipped with AR markers or QR codes are not considered part of the category of physical signs for the sake of consistency in communication.
  - <sup>9</sup> According to the World Cultural Heritage: The National Treasure of Himeji Castle Homepage, in total, there are 16 AR-equipped public signs within the territory of Himeji Castle. (Retrieved March 5, 2025, from <https://www.himejicastle.jp/>)

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