

Linguistic Landscape in an English-Speaking Community: A Case Study of the University District of Seattle

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1. Introduction

As one of the earliest studies in this field, Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 23) have defined linguistic landscape (hereafter LL) as “visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region.” The study initially spotlighted the conflict between the languages on public and commercial signs in bilingual or multilingual environments (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Cunningham & King, 2021). Since then, the LL study has received a great deal of interdisciplinary attention from scholars and researchers. Until now, relevant research has been conducted from various perspectives, such as sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistic vitality, communicative strategies, language education, etc. (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Backhaus, 2006; Lazdina & Marten, 2009; Amos, 2014; Cunningham & King, 2021; Chen, 2022).

The impacts of the English language use in LL vary significantly from community to community. In non-English-speaking and local-language-dominated communities or regions like Tokyo and Taiwan, the use of the English language in the LL, i.e., the practice of bilingual or multilingual public or commercial signs, is frequently associated with local policies of a call for globalization (Backhaus, 2006; Chen, 2022). However, such is not the case with English-speaking communities, like Seattle’s University District (hereafter U District), a case study of the research in this paper. Despite the unique features of the LL in English-speaking communities, there have been insufficient previous studies dealing with this aspect of the research.

This paper aims to expand the traditional LL studies, particularly to English-speaking communities, and to propose another research approach via the LL case study in the U District of Seattle. The paper starts with an Introduction in Part One, which is succeeded by Part Two exploring the sociolinguistic background of the U District, Seattle and the framework of the previous studies of LL. Part Two further points out the need for research on the less observed aspect of the study. In Part Three, an empirical research of the LL in the U District, Seattle was conducted, covering the research method, data collection and management. Part Four carries out a discussion of the data from a pragmatic approach, specifically from an approach of positive

politeness and negative politeness. Finally, Part Five concludes what has been discussed and analyzed on the LL in the U District, Seattle.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Sociolinguistic Backgrounds of Seattle and the University District

The Emerald City of Seattle, located in the state of Washington, is “a commercial and advanced technology hub of the U.S. Pacific Northwest and a major port city for trans-Pacific and European travel and trade” (Seattle, n.d.). As a port for tourism, the city is geographically bounded by Lake Washington to the east and Puget Sound to the west, which makes it an ideal location for water recreation and sightseeing cruises (Visit The USA, n.d.). The city thus attracts hundreds and thousands of tourists and visitors from home and abroad. Commercially and technologically, Seattle is renowned for being the headquarters of some global corporate giants, such as Starbucks, Amazon, Microsoft, and Boeing (Quest & Buckley, 2023). This research is mainly focused on the U District, a destination for culinary adventure and shopping (U District, n.d.), which is located only one block away from the University of Washington’s (hereafter UW) Seattle campus. The U District, whose boundaries are customarily informal, surrounds 45th Street, Brooklyn/Roosevelt, North Ave, Mid Ave and South Ave (U District, n.d.).

Demographically, Seattle also enjoys a reputation for being a multicultural and multilingual community. A look at Fig.1 below reveals an impressive diversity of race and ethnicity in Seattle and the U District. In Seattle, 65.7% of the population, an absolute majority, are non-Hispanic Whites, and 14.1% of the citizens are Asians, which further means residents with more different cultural backgrounds. Other racial

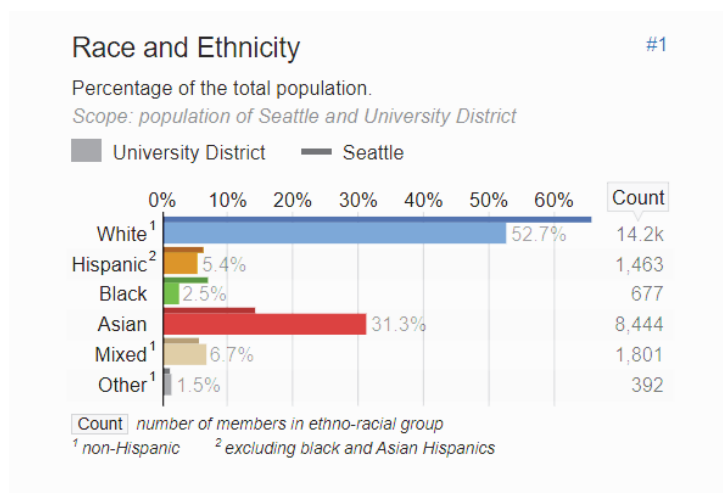


Fig. 1 Race and Ethnicity in Seattle and the University of District
(Statistical Atlas, n.d.)

and ethnic groups in Seattle include Hispanic, Black, Mixed, and so on. The racial and ethnic diversity in the U District is quite similar to that in Seattle, with non-Hispanic whites at 52.7% and Asians at 31.3%. Though white-dominated in race and ethnicity, Seattle and the U District have a much higher ratio of the minor ethnic groups (34.3% and 47.3%, respectively) than Tokyo (2.8% registered foreign residents according to Backhaus).

2.2 Official and Nonofficial Signs

The LL research subjects or public and commercial signs may range extensively from “street names” and “advertising signs” to “security information” according to the previous studies in the past decades. Landry and Bourhis’ mention of six types of signs in (1), Spolsky’s eight major types of signs in (2), and Lazdia and Marten’s 23 parameters in Table 1 are among the representative previous studies into the LL. The great variety and discrepancy in the sign classification are observed in (1), (2) and Table 1. For the sake of brevity and a focused discussion on the issue, the paper further introduces the literature on official and nonofficial signs (Calvet, 1990, 1994; Backhaus, 2006).

- (1) 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 linguistic landscape of a territory can serve two basic functions: an informational function and a symbolic function.

(Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25)

- (2) Eight major types of signs
 - Street signs
 - Advertising signs
 - Warning notices and prohibitions
 - Building names
 - Informative signs (direction, hours of opening)
 - Commemorative plaques
 - Objects (postbox, police call box)
 - Graffiti

(Spolsky, 2009, p. 34)

Table 1: The Parameter “Type of Sign”
(Lazdia & Marten, 2009, p. 216)

Parameters	Number
Name of establishment	1
Other sign of establishment	2
Sign at establishment not by the establishment	3
Product on display, e.g., in a shop window	4
Street sign	5
Personal name plate	6
Sticker	7
Advertising poster	8
Graffiti	9
Security information	10
Private information	11
Official information	12
Sign allowing/prohibiting something	13
Direction sign on private shop or similar	14
Credit card sign	15
Security sign	16
Timetable	20
Political information/slogan	21
Memorial sign	22
WiFi sign	23
Student card sign	24
Sign at door (interphone, post box or similar)	25
Other	99

Backhaus (2006, p. 53), based on previous research on LL in Calvet (1990, 1994), points out that an important variable is “the distinction between official and nonofficial signs.” The distinction, illustrated in (3), falls on the point that official and nonofficial signs are established by different language planners for different purposes with different strategies. Official signs tend to reveal a monolingual image of a given territory, while nonofficial signs often reveal a multilingual image of the territory. The contradiction and interaction between these two types of signs are summarized by Landry and Bourhis in (4) below. The different strategies adopted in communication between language planners and language receivers are further elaborated in Part Four below.

- (3) Between what is written by the authority (the names of roads, for instance, or traffic rule signs) and what is written by the citizens (the names of shops, graffiti, commercials, etc.). There are two different ways of marking the territory, two inscriptions into the urban space.

(Calvet, 1990, p. 75; translation by Backhaus)

- (4) In some cases, the language profile of private signs and government signs may be quite similar and thus contribute to a consistent and coherent linguistic landscape. There are instances, however, in which the language of private signs is quite discordant with the language profile of government signs.

(Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 27)

2.3 Negative Face and Positive Face

Landry and Bourhis (1997) have stated that the LL of a given region can serve an informational function and a symbolic function. The informational function involves such participants as the addresser, i.e., the sender of the information, and the addressee, i.e., the recipient of the information. In this paper, we claim that the former function further involves communicative strategies that the addresser employs to avoid or minimize any face-threatening acts (FTAs), which can be efficiently clarified by Brown and Levinson's positive politeness and negative politeness as defined in (5) and (6) below.

- (5) Positive politeness is redress directed to the addressee's positive face, his perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable.

(Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 101)

- (6) Negative politeness is redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded.

(Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 129)

3. The Seattle Survey

3.1 About the Survey

The field survey of the LL in the U District of Seattle was conducted by the author between July 26th and August 8th, 2022. Photography was used as a primary method for recording the public and commercial signs as data for this research. During the stay, the author randomly took photos of a great variety of signs in the U District, mainly the UW's Seattle campus, University Village (hereafter U Village), and the neighboring regions. The photos were all taken through the eyes of a pedestrian. The

photos also include some temporarily installed signs for the summer events in the community, such as Fig. 2 and (7) below.

(7) EVENT TONIGHT! Please drive carefully! U VILLAGE



Fig. 2 EVENT TONIGHT! Please drive carefully!

(Photo by the author, the same applies hereafter)

3.2 Methodology

This paper is a qualitative study aiming to analyze and clarify the features of the signs in the U District, based on the photos taken during the author's stay in Seattle. The analysis is conducted from the perspectives of multilingualism and the politeness theory. The former perspective concentrates on the language uses of monolingual and multilingual signs, mostly nonofficial signs, and the languages' respective roles in the English-speaking community. On the other hand, in the latter perspectives of positive politeness and negative politeness, the focus is placed on the official signs that are related to warning and forbidding notices because these signs are of great authority and power in hindering and impeding the addressee's freedom and actions.

4. Data Analysis and Discussions

4.1 Multilingualism and Monolingualism in the Language Use of LL

In the U District, monolingual signs (English-only signs) display an absolute majority of the photos taken for this research over multilingual signs. In the monolingual signs as Fig. 3 and Fig. 4, the English language plays a dual role as the local language and the EFL (English as a lingua franca), the latter being a global means of intercommunity communication. Due to the great racial diversity in the addressees of the LL in the U District, i.e., locals, international students, and foreign



Fig. 3 University Village Entrance



Fig. 4 Road Work Ahead

tourists, the largest common denominator of the languages or potential languages is the English language. Further, it is even more challenging to determine the second widely used language in the community due to the great degree of diversity in race and ethnicity, as discussed above. As a result, monolingual signs are extensively installed in this community, except for restaurants and shops of foreign origin.

Among an extremely limited number of bilingual and multilingual signs in the U District, Fig. 5 and Fig 6 are two examples with the presence of Chinese and Japanese in addition to English. The multilingual information on these two signs is arranged in different manners. In Fig. 5, the Chinese and English languages partially constitute mutual translations of each other (fragmentary), while in Fig. 6 the Japanese and English languages completely constitute mutual translations of each other (duplicating) (Reh, 2004). In Fig 5, the English translation, “PANDA Noodle Bar,” which is not a word for word translation, along with five Chinese characters, i.e., *xin jin long mian ba* (literally new golden dragon noodle bar), appeals to a broader reach of potential customers. Fig. 6 exhibits Japanese *Katakana* (one of the two Japanese syllabaries) and a word for word English translation in a duplicating way. This LL strategy naturally creates an atmosphere of the respective restaurants that satisfies “the belongingness and love needs” particularly of the visitors bonded to or interested in China (or Chinese) and Japan (or Japanese) (Maslow, 1954, pp. 80-92). The customers’ sense of being welcomed and loved can be triggered by the LL of the restaurants.



Fig. 5 PANDA Noodle Bar



Fig. 6 KATSU BURGER



Fig. 7 Quiet Area

The multilingual sign strategy can be observed in another example of multilingual signs, i.e., a temporary standing flaglike signboard at the entrance of Suzzallo Library at the UW. The LL on the UW campus, in general, is similar to that in the U District, with most of the signs being monolingual. Fig. 7 is one of the limited number of multilingual signs on the campus, including five languages, i.e., Chinese, English, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish. Suzzallo Library, the interior decorating and atmosphere of which remind visitors of some Harry Potter movie scenes, has become a popular sightseeing site among many international students in various summer programs at the UW. For example,

STEP, one of the language and culture programs provided by the university, included the library as a part of the campus tour for the participants on the orientation day. The intended addressees become apparent in this context; therefore, the choice of the languages is easily conducted by the language planners of the LL on the campus to satisfy the addressees.

4.2 Positive Politeness in LL

LL is a communicative medium that transmits on-the-spot information from the addressers or sign installers to the addressees or the information recipient. This paper hypothesizes that the medium includes not only the visible and salient language use with designs (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) but also the communicative strategies adopted by the addresser in order for successful communicative activities. To verify the addresser's strategies in the warning and forbidding signs in the U District, Seattle, Brown and Levison's negative politeness and positive politeness are suggested.

In Brown and Levison's positive politeness (1978, p. 102), Strategy 15 of "giving gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)" is applicable to nonofficial signs like Fig. 8 and (8) below. The sign is a message for staff recruitment of a shop in U Village. These "gifts" are further interpreted in this paper as a kind of compliment to the addressees of the sign. After the main message of "We're Hiring!" on the sign, the installer's good mastery of words corresponds to a positive politeness strategy of complimenting the intended addressees. Reading the message on the sign, the potential applicants may feel that they are needed, "liked, admired, cared about, understood" (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 129).



Fig. 8 We're Hiring!

(8) We're Hiring! We have everything we need to inspire our customers. Except you!

4.3 Negative Politeness in LL

Negative politeness in the light of warning and forbidding signs is much more complicated, necessitating a revised version of Brown and Levinson's negative politeness strategies. In Brown and Levinson's negative politeness, on the one hand, there is a "want to BE DIRECT" or minimum imposition as in (9) below; on the other hand, "negative politeness corresponds to Durkheim's 'negative rites,' rituals of avoidance" (1978, p. 129). When imposition (Be Direct) and avoidance (Do not coerce) clash, conventional indirect strategies as in (10) are usually preferred. (11), an indirect imposition, is one conventional example of compromise between imposition and avoidance. In Fig. 2 or (7) above, the sign calling for careful driving during the event was temporarily set up on the event day of August 3, 2022. The reason, i.e., EVENT TONIGHT, is displayed saliently at the very beginning in bigger capital letters, in order that the imposition of not being able to drive as usual is minimized by detailing reasons. Fig. 4, or (12), is a similar example, which further shows dominant emphasis on the reason since the purpose of setting up this sign, i.e., the potential activity of careful and slow driving, is not even explicitly verbalized. However, in the warning and forbidding signs from (13) to (22), the addressees approaching these official signs need immediate and prompt action to stop or slow down. Otherwise, they will face the risk of life in a traffic accident due to violating the traffic laws. In the specific case of LL, the clash between this urgent reminding and avoidance ends with not the above indirect imposition but a newly suggested direct (but short) imposition, which is named "the plain language strategy" in this paper.

- (9) Nevertheless, intuition tells us that there is an element in formal politeness that sometimes directs one to minimize the imposition of prolixity and obscurity.

(Brown and Levinson, 1978, p. 130)

- (10) In linguistic realizations --- conventional indirectness, hedges on illocutionary force, polite pessimism (about the success of requests, etc.), the emphasis on H's relative power --- are very familiar and need no introduction.

(Brown and Levinson, 1978, p. 130)

- (11) Can you please pass the salt?

(Brown and Levinson, 1978, p. 133)

(12) ROAD WORK AHEAD

(13) EXIT ONLY

(14) ONLY BUS

(15) SPEED LIMIT 25

(16) STOP

(17) YIELD

- (18) SLOW
- (19) NO PARKING
- (20) PED XING
- (21) DO NOT ENTER
- (22) ONE WAY

4.4 The Plain Language Strategy in LL

The plain language strategy, as a newly suggested negative politeness strategy, can efficiently ease the imposition on the readers of the official warning and forbidding signs. This strategy is fulfilled due to the features of plain language in (23) and (24) that meet the addressees' need to spend the least time (while driving) to understand and respond to the signs from (13) through (22). There appear some unique traits in the expressions on the official warning and forbidding signs from (13) to (22). First, all of them are short, no more than three words. The shortest one has only one word, as in (16), (17) and (18). Second, straightforward and unambiguous words are used to increase the readership as much as possible. Third, shortened versions of long words are created. For instance, longer words or phrases like "pedestrian crossing" are avoided by creating shorter words like "PED XING" as in (20) above.

(23) Direct, accessible language is often called plain language. Plain language is designed to communicate information as clearly as possible so it can reach as many people as possible.

(Kramer, 2023)

(24) For example, signage at a train platform might include the sentence "Wait behind the yellow line." This plain sentence includes the line's color so travelers know where to stand and wait. The signage likely wouldn't include a sentence with unnecessary details like "Wait behind the yellow line until the train arrives and then walk into the train in an orderly fashion to avoid injury." Even though these details are true, they don't add any critical information to the sentence.

(Kramer, 2023)

5. Conclusions

We have so far explored the LL in English-speaking communities, focusing on the case study of the LL in the University District of Seattle. The analysis of the official and nonofficial signs the author collected on the field trip to Seattle was conducted from perspective of positive politeness and negative politeness in pragmatics. The analysis has shown that the newly suggested strategy of "be direct" efficiently analyzed the communication between the addresser and addressee of the warning and

forbidding signs in the LL. The plain language used in the official signs has also been proven to supplement the negative politeness strategy in LL communication. Since the above analyses were limited to the case study of the U District, Seattle, a follow-up study into the LL should be carried out for a further step of the study.

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