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Project Title: Linguistic Landscape of Singapore Food Stall Signage

Abstract:

a) Academic Significance/ Novelty of Research

This research project aims to use the linguistic landscape of public eating places in Singapore such as hawker centres, coffee shops, and food courts to examine the factors that determine the use of languages in the signage given the background of language policies in Singapore. This will help us understand the complexities of the factors that come into play beyond what language managers have been trying to achieve.

Linguistic landscape studies the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a territory or region. The importance of linguistic landscape lies in its function in marking the "geographical territory inhabited by a given language community" (Landry and Bourhis 1997: 25). The presence of a language on the linguistic landscape indicates its ethnolinguistic vitality. By using the ethnolinguistic theoretical framework, the results of such a study will reflect the language use and identity of the people inhabiting the region.

For a multilingual and multicultural nation like Singapore, it is even more pertinent and interesting to explore the linguistic landscape, which will reflect the social psychological aspects of multilingual development over time. Yeoh, when discussing street names, confirms that "the landscape of nationhood ... bore the imprint of equally salient ideologies such as multiracialism since all systems of authority draw on some form of landscape text to legitimise their rule ... (Yeoh 1996: 305).

Language planners in Belgium (Verdoot, 1979), and in Quebec (Corbeil, 1980) were among the first to recognize the importance of regulation in language use in public signs including billboards, street signs, and commercial signs (Leclerc, 1989) to mark the boundaries of linguistic territories.

There is a distinction between official signs, which are dictated by by-laws, and unofficial signs erected by individuals or private companies, who have a free hand in deciding what goes on a sign. This project focuses more on the latter in that signage in hawker centres and coffee shops seem to be put up by stall owners who decide what goes on a sign. However, the content of signs in food courts such as Kopitiam, Koufu, Food Republic, and Food Junction may be decided by the companies who own these food courts.

The novelty of this project lies in examining the language of signs put up in hawker centres, which seem to allow more autonomy as to what goes on the sign, and contrasting these to signs in air conditioned food courts, which seem to be predominantly English. In cases where the government has given the stall owners a free hand to do what they prefer, it will be interesting to understand the factors that affect their decisions. This can be contrasted to the food signs in food courts, which may get the directives from the business owners.

The study of these food signs are also seen in the context where language policies of the nation are at work. The government has some clear language policies to be implemented in schools. In 1979 when the Speak Mandarin Campaign was launched, it brought about significant changes in the Chinese language being taught in schools and official use of the Chinese language. Firstly, dialects are banned in media and discouraged even at home; secondly, there is a switch to use pinyin romanization instead of dialect spelling; thirdly, the Chinese script used in schools and official public signs are changed from traditional to simplified scripts.

This study will examine how much these government implementations can be seen in food signage. For ease of discussion, the comparison can be simplified to those in hawker centres vs~ those in food courts.

We will observe that in hawker centres, there are still many stalls that use the traditional script and dialect romanization instead of the simplified script and pinyin romanization. In other stalls, there is a mix of traditional and simplified script as well as a mixture of pinyin romanization and dialect romanization. It is therefore intriguing to understand how much of these decisions are influenced by language policies and what other forces are at play in making these choices (Bokhorst-Heng and Silver 2017; Wee 2010).

b) Hypothesis/ Research Questions to be Addressed

The hypothesis/research questions to be addressed are as follows:
1. How do the various patterns of language signs in hawker centres reflect the mindset of these stall owners? Why do some use only one language rather than use bilingual signs? Why do they use traditional scripts instead of the simplified scripts? Why do they continue to use dialect romanization instead of pinyin romanization? Why do some of them mix the traditional and simplified scripts? Why is there a mixture of pinyin romanization and dialect romanization?

2. How do the various patterns of language signs in foodcourts reflect the mindset of the owners? Are they following orders from some regulations? How are these different from those in the hawker centres and why?

3. Given that there are language policies set by the government for official sites, road signs etc. How much of what we see in hawker centres adheres to the language policies and how much differs from them? What forces or factors are behind these choices? Do these forces and factors represent a deeper layer of language identity or cultural identity of Singapore people? Is there a difference between different generations?

c) Methodology/ Approach and Feasibility of study

This study will use the ethnographic method to collect the names of stalls in hawker centres, coffee shops and food courts. Students will be employed to do the following:
1. Record the stall names and food names of hawker centres, food courts and coffee shops;
2. Interview the stall owners to understand why certain decisions are made when it comes to naming the stall and food;
3. Find out about the perception of the different combination of signage e.g. Traditional vs. simplified script, dialect spelling vs. hanyu pinyin etc. How do perceptions change with different settings of hawker centres, coffee shops and foodcourts?
4. The data will be compiled and analysed to come up with a theoretical construct.