

The symbolic functions of linguistic landscape in global tourist destinations: Insights from Tokyo and Berlin

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Abstract

The Shin-Ōkubo and Neukölln quarters are multi-ethnic tourist destinations near Tokyo's and Berlin's centers, respectively. Over the past two decades, the significant influx of immigrants to both quarters has led to notable changes, especially in the quarters' Linguistic Landscape (LL). Based on a linguistic-ethnographic approach, this study clarified the main features and latent functions of such LL changes. Data was collected between 2022 and 2024 based on direct observation, photographic documentation, content analysis of street services' signs, and semi-structured interviews with eight shopkeepers in each quarter. Results revealed that Arabic is mainly used in Neukölln's LL as a compatible communicative medium to overcome language barriers and foster a sense of community. Whereas Chinese is used in Shin-Ōkubo's activities as an ideological tool to express identity and power in a competing multi-ethnic entity. These findings highlight the significance of LL in promoting and maintaining the identity of multi-ethnic tourist destinations.

Keywords

Linguistic landscape
Immigrant
Latent
Ethnic
Tourist destination

Introduction

Recently, there has been an increasing interest in examining the characteristics of ethnic minority groups of immigrants, in global cities, in different urban and sociolinguistic contexts (Rahman & Muntasir, 2022; Cenoz & Gorter, 2006). Such an interest is triggered by the notable demographic and socio-economic consequences of the significant waves of immigrants, post WWII, to Japan, the U.S.A, and Western European countries (e.g., France, Germany, and the U.K.). The labor force shortage in these countries encouraged them to welcome a considerable number of immigrants. Then, since the early 1990s, immigration waves, especially from Arab countries in the Middle East, have been increased driven by instability or challenging economic situations in the immigrants' home countries, which forced them to leave and aim for a better life. The immigrants often settled in poor or middle-class quarters near city centers forming sizeable ethnic minority groups that greatly influenced the demographic, social, and urban characteristics of these quarters. An obvious impact is the accelerated Linguistic Landscape (LL) transformations in urban spaces as a result of the increasing number of business activities dominated by the immigrants' native languages, cultures, and beliefs. LL refers to the social context of multilingualism in a public sphere (Gorter, 2006), represented in the texts and language used for public urban settings (e.g., names of streets and places, road signs, advertising billboards, commercial shop signs, and government buildings' signs) in a specific territory, region, or urban agglomeration. According to Landry and Bourhis (1997), LL entails indexical/informative and symbolic functions often associated with the inhabitants' characteristics. For instance, using specific languages in a shop signage not only helps knowing the types of products/services that may exist but also provides access to the business owner's native culture or extent of urban change. However, unlike LL indexical functions which are often salient (visible) and can be easily recognized, the LL symbolic functions are usually latent (invisible) and requires deep investigation. In this context, the present study provides an in-depth analysis of the LL

in two multi-ethnic tourist destinations, Shin-Ōkubo in Tokyo and Neukölln in Berlin, aiming to clarify how the LL is administered and exploited by ethnic minorities in both destinations.

Theoretical Framework

The indexical or informative function of LL refers to using specific language(s) to provide commercial or non-commercial information to customers and passersby in public spaces. Meanwhile, the symbolic function of LL refers to the intrinsic social, cultural, and economic reasons for promoting specific language(s) in the LL of a given place. For instance, when immigrants use their native language(s) in a host country it is not only seen as resistance to assimilation (Choi et al., 2021) but also as a form of globalization, socialization, or identification (Jha, 2018).

Furthermore, the dominance of a particular language and ethnic manifestations on the LL of an urban space plays a critical role in reshaping its perceived identity, especially in multicultural communities. As argued by Leeman and Modan (2009), understanding the symbolic function of LL is crucial for interpreting urban spaces in ideological, social, and communicative contexts. For example, the presence or absence of specific languages in public spaces might signify which languages are valued or marginalized, illustrating the power dynamics of cultural influences. Also, using specific languages in public spaces can foster a sense of inclusion among speakers of those languages, highlighting the community's multiculturalism. Furthermore, multilingual public spaces encourage engagement and interaction between visitors and multi-ethnic communities, easing their daily navigation and communication. Nevertheless, identifying such latent functions goes beyond the visible characteristics of LL to include the ethnographic and socio-economic dimensions of the place and its users (residents and visitors).

Study Areas

Shin-Ōkubo and Neukölln are famous ethnic tourist



Figure 1. Study area in Shin-Ōkubo and distribution of surveyed activities



Figure 2. Study area in Neukölln and distribution of surveyed activities

destinations which experienced significant demographic, social, and urban changes driven by the successive influx of Southeast Asian immigrants to Tokyo and Arab immigrants to Berlin, over the past two decades. The Shin-Ōkubo quarter in Tokyo's Shinjuku ward (Figure 1), has been known as a Korean ethnic entity, since the late 1980s, upon the significant influx of Koreans to the quarter. By the early 1990s, a cluster of Korean businesses emerged in the quarter in response to the growing number of Japanese tourists fond of the popular South Korean culture known as 'Korean Wave' or 'Hanryū' (韓流) (Shin, 2021). The economic success of Shin-Ōkubo, over the past decade, attracted the interest of newcomer foreign residents and businesses, especially from Southeast Asian countries, contributing to the area's growing appeal as a multi-ethnic tourist destination. Although this demographic shift offered more economic opportunities and cultural exchanges in Shin-Ōkubo, it resulted in dramatic transformations in the quarters' LL that was once overwhelmed with Korean (Backhaus 2006).

The former West Berlin Neukölln quarter is about 10 Km South of Berlin's center (Figure 2). After the reunification of Berlin in the early 1990s, Neukölln has experienced a significant gentrification process driven by successive inbound waves of immigrants (Pahl, 2013). Because of its strategic location and affordable rents, it was a popular hub for students, artists, and immigrants mainly from Turkey and the Middle East (Ikeda, 2019). As a result, over the past two decades, Neukölln has witnessed significant demographic, socio-economic, and urban transformations caused by the dramatic increase in immigrants' business activities with diverse ethnic and cultural influences.

Research Methods and Limitations

Data was collected during field visits to Berlin in July 2022 and Tokyo in June 2024, covering an approximate study area of 2 km² in each quarter. About 305 activities in Shin-Ōkubo and 716

activities in Neukölln were observed and documented in several high-quality photographs, from different angles, to ensure that all texts on the activities' outdoor signages, doors, or walls are covered. Only the texts of activities on the ground or first floors of the buildings overlooking the main and side streets have been documented. Also, this study is limited to surveying the nonofficial texts written by residents or shopkeepers (e.g., texts on shop signs or billboards). A similar approach was adopted by Backhaus (2006), who investigated the multilingual landscape in Tokyo in 2003.

Firstly, the photos taken were coded and clustered in ExcelSheet according to each activity's coordinates on Google Maps. Additional information on each activity's type and the frequency of used languages were obtained through an in-depth content analysis of the texts shown in each photo. The language detection was carried out based on the author's multilingual skills, supplemented by image-based language detection apps (e.g., Google Translate). Then, multilingual speakers revised and validated the detected languages, especially those of Shin-Ōkubo, where Japanese and Chinese texts overlap and are pretty similar. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight owners/operators of activities in each quarter to complement the statistical analysis. Applying mixed-methods in LL research is recommended to explore issues beyond the mere identification of language(s) frequency to include the social dimensions and functions of LL (Blackwood, 2015). Due to the interviewees' busy schedules, the interviews lasted an average of about 16 minutes. The interviewees were asked about languages they can speak and their intentions of using specific language(s) for their businesses' titles and other texts. All interviews were conducted in person

at the interviewees' businesses, voice recorded in English or Japanese, transcribed, and thematically analyzed.

Results and Discussion

Except for Japanese, German, and English, there are six common ethnic languages in both quarters (Figure 3). In Shin-Ōkubo, Japanese and English dominate the LL of activities' signages. However, Japanese is the native language of Shin-Ōkubo, while English is used as a common language and sign of globalization and modernity (Leeman & Modan, 2009). Therefore, statistically, Chinese (mandarin and traditional) and Korean are the most represented ethnic languages in about 48 (15.7%) and 34 (11.1%) of all activities in Shin-Ōkubo, respectively. Despite the slight difference in the usage frequency of Chinese and Korean, it threatens the identity of Shin-Ōkubo as an ethnic Korean town and signals its potential transformation into a 'China Town'. A recent study argued that Shin-Ōkubo has already lost its substantial features as an ethnic Korean community; namely spatial cohesion and ethnic ties between Korean businesses, and thus, its identity as an ethnic Korean tourist attraction in Tokyo has been diminished (Shin, 2021).

On the one hand, in most multilingual signages with Chinese texts in Shin-Ōkubo, Chinese is displayed in a prominent position and font size over the other ethnic languages. As shown in Figure 1, the flag of Malaysia is displayed on restaurant signage with a title primarily written in Chinese. When asked about his intentions for this unique combination, the restaurant owner said, "*We are a Chinese family, but my father is Malaysian; therefore, we preferred*

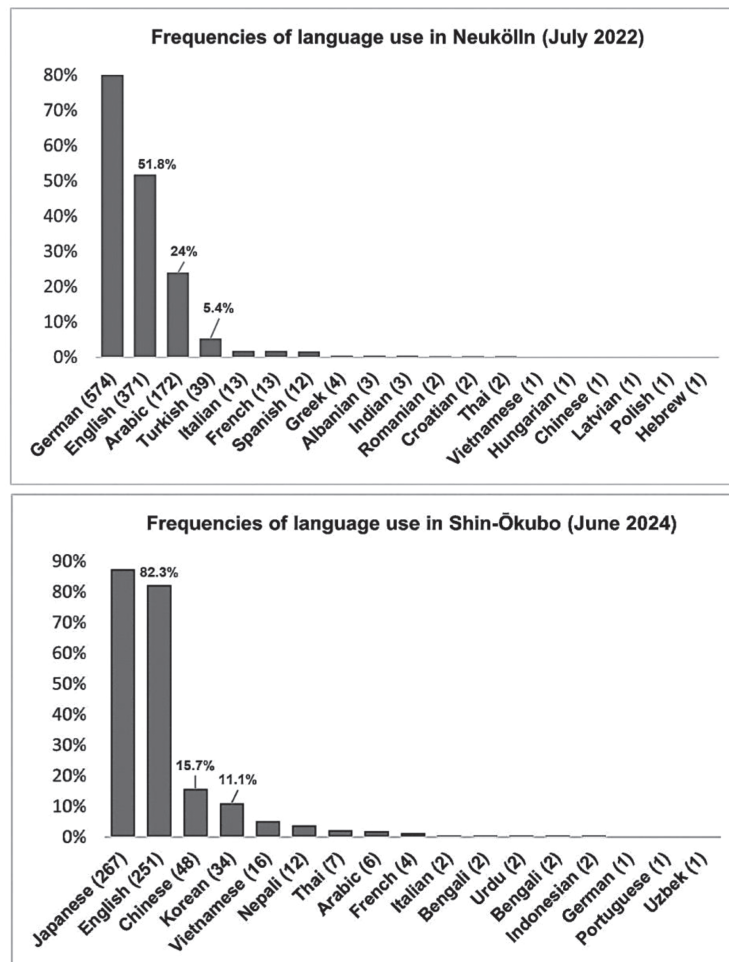


Figure 3. Frequencies of language use in study areas

to keep both identities and because we speak Chinese, and our customers are mainly Chinese and Malaysians". According to Gorter and Cenoz (2008), positive feelings (e.g., pride and power) emerge among ethnic minorities when their native language is represented in the commercial LL of an urban area.

On the other hand, Arabic is pervasive in the LL of 172 activities' in Neukölln (about 24%) of all activities. Also, Arabic is the third most represented language, after German and English, in more than 1/3 (about 34%) of the surveyed activities' in Sonnenallee; therefore, it is also known as the 'Arab street'. The excessive appearance of Arabic in Neukölln could be seen a result of the sizable Arab community or increasing number of tourists who can communicate in Arabic in Neukölln. However, a Syrian shopkeeper at 'Sonnenallee' Street clarified a latent reason for this phenomenon by saying, "Using Arabic and Deutsch as primary languages in my business is logical. The highest percentage of passersby and residents in the quarter are Arabs, who find it easier to communicate in Arabic". Similarly, several interviewees pointed out that the intensive use of Arabic in the quarter's LL eases their interaction with the urban landscape and Arab immigrants or visitors, especially the newcomers and old generation, who can only communicate in Arabic. Moreover, the interviewees stated that the spread of Arabic in Neukölln's LL created an atmosphere like that in their home countries, decreasing their alienation and enforcing their sense of community.

Conclusion

This study delved into the symbolic functions of LL, highlighting its significance in promoting or maintaining a specific identity in multi-ethnic tourist destinations. It clarified how the Linguistic landscapes in Shin-Ōkubo in Tokyo and Neukölln in Berlin are administered and employed differently by ethnic minority groups.

For instance, in Shin-Ōkubo, Chinese is notably used in the activities' LL as an identification tool and an expression of power in a place with competing ethnic activities. Similarly, Leeman and Modan (2009) clarified how Chinese is commodified for economic and ideological purposes and to give prospective visitors a feeling of being in a typical Chinese town. However, in Neukölln, the excessive use of Arabic in the LL creates a sense of community, fosters ethnic bonds, and offers a friendly space for the old generations and newcomer Arab immigrants who may challenging language barriers. This finding contradicts Shamsuddin and Katsaiti's (2020) claims that Arab immigrants in Germany have assimilated into the German society culture.

In conclusion, LL can be symbolically used by immigrants for 'ideological' purposes to promote their native identity, cultures, and beliefs such as in Shin-Ōkubo, or for 'communicative' purposes to create a harmonious living/working environment such as in Neukölln.

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