The Linguistic Landscape of Chinatown
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The Linguistic Landscape of Chinatown

A Sociolinguistic Ethnography

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The seed for this book was planted when I first arrived in Washington, DC, in the summer of 2003 for graduate school. I flew from Shanghai to New York City, and my cousins drove me down with all my luggage. It was almost dinner time when we arrived in the city, so we went to a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown. As someone who grew up in Shanghai and studied in Hong Kong, the Chinatown in Washington, DC, struck me as more Chinese than China. There were Chinese signs everywhere, and the grand archway at the intersection of H and 7th Streets was something that I would fancy seeing only in more historical Chinese cities. For a moment, I felt I was time (and space) traveling. This somewhat strange first impression stayed with me as I spent most of my time in another part of the city, busy with graduate schoolwork, in the next couple of years. It was not until 2005, when I attended Ron Scollon’s graduate seminar on public discourse, that this early intrigue with Chinatown grew into a research project. Inspired by the geosemiotic framework in *Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World* (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), I analyzed the signage in the neighborhood in terms of its language varieties, as well as its visual and material characteristics, and discussed the findings in relation to Foucault’s heterotopia (Lou, 2005, 2007). This early research led me to examine more closely the relationship between language, space and place in this gentrifying neighborhood. In particular, I was intrigued by the official mandate behind the bilingual commercial signage: How did it come about in the historical context of the neighborhood? What cultural, economic and political forces shaped the policy? How has the policy, and resulting linguistic landscape, shaped the perception of the neighborhood? And how does it impact everyday life and communication in the street? These questions guided me through 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork, and provided the general framework of the study.
Ever since I completed my doctoral dissertation, the relationship between linguistic landscape and urban development has continued to intrigue me, albeit in a very different spatial context – Hong Kong. Accelerated urban renewal programs in many older districts around the territory have often displaced entire communities, given rise to condominium buildings adorned by symbols of opulence, and essentialized the traditional characteristics of older neighborhoods. The heavy reliance on tourism and luxury retail has replaced the vernacular signage of small businesses with shiny logos of global brands. At the same time, these changes have put questions about historical preservation and cultural identities back on people’s minds. When the government boarded up a hawkers’ bazaar before its demolition, community members made tape art on the boards; when European graffiti artists were paid to decorate the walls of a back alley in a gentrifying industrial area, activists sprayed messages of protest over their graffiti. Linguistic landscape not only is shaped by the dominant political and economic agenda, but has also become a site of protest and negotiation.

Meanwhile, in sociolinguistics, more and more researchers have started to examine linguistic landscapes, not simply as a multilingual phenomenon, but as a text that chronicles urban change. To name just a few examples, about the same time as I was completing my dissertation research, Leeman and Modan (2009) studied the linguistic landscape of the same Chinatown by contextualizing it in the historical development of the neighborhood and the district’s urban planning policies. Pennycook (2009, 2010) looked at graffiti as a form of urban literacy practice and the voice of sub-cultural groups. In Hong Kong, Jaworski and Yeung (2010) looked into the relationship between residential property names and social class stratification, and Hutton (2011) linked the density of signs to vernacular spaces. More recently, Blommaert (2013) argued that linguistic landscape offers a unique window into the complexity of a super-diverse urban neighborhood.

Adopting a similar ethnographic and urban orientation, this book analyzes the meanings of linguistic landscape by situating it in the time and space of Washington, DC’s Chinatown. It traces the historical trajectories of discourses at various times that contributed to the present bilingual signage policy, from the history of Chinese immigrants in America to the community meetings held to review signage design. Spatially, it embeds the linguistic landscape of the neighborhood in the everyday life of its residents and visitors on the local scale as well as in the international relationship between China and the US on the global scale. In so doing, it is hoped that this book will contribute to our understanding of linguistic landscape as a site in which the cultural representation of place and material production of space enter complex interaction and negotiation.
I have been extremely fortunate to have the enduring support of many colleagues and friends, whose faith in this project has been sometimes stronger than my own. First of all, I would like to thank everyone in Chinatown without whom this book would not have existed, and especially Mr Wang, the Mayor of Chinatown, who introduced me to the neighborhood and community. I owe a debt of gratitude to my series editor, Anna De Fina, for her support, encouragement and wisdom in nurturing my rough manuscript through to a publishable book. I am also thankful to Kim Eggleton at Multilingual Matters for professional guidance and much-needed gentle reminders. The book was greatly improved by the extremely constructive comments from the two anonymous reviewers, whose suggestions also provided inspirations for new research projects. My heart-felt gratitude goes to Cecilia Ayometzi, Caroline Rutledge Armijo, Lyn Fogle, Anna Trester, Patrick Callier, Robert Podesva, Christopher Jenks, Rodney Jones and my agraphia group for cheering me on along this long journey, and to Ahkok Wong, for being the best writing buddy in my life. Ron and Suzie: I am not sure whether this book is good enough, but I would still like to dedicate it to you both. Almost 10 years ago, you were the first audience to show up in the conference room when I was presenting for the very first time my project on Chinatown. I will never forget the expression of enthusiasm and encouragement on your faces that day.