Linguistic landscape in Nanchang: A look into the biliterate street name sign

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Abstract

Street name sign is a part of linguistic landscape in cities. The previous studies mainly focused in multilingual cities or multilingual (or colonized) communities rather than monolingual cities where globalization is progressing. This study took field photographing survey method and selected three typical areas in Nanchang, a developing city in China as the target for further study to explore the biliterate phenomenon. The result reveals that the linguistic situation is biliterate with Chinese language as the dominance. The underlying reasons for such phenomenon are explored either from the political or practical perspectives: to abide the law and regulations or to create a potential internationalized atmosphere.

Key words: linguistic landscape; street name sign; biliterate; Nanchang

Introduction

As a part of linguistic landscape, street name sign is studied by various scholars from different perspectives (Landry and Bourhis, 1997; Jones and Merriman, 2009; Nash, 1999; Zhao & Liu, 2014). However, the settings studied in the previous studies were mainly in multilingual cities or at least in multilingual (or colonized) communities with multiethnic inhabitants, reflecting the language use or language related conflicts. Scarce research focused on the situation of linguistic landscape in cities where they are monolingual but are influenced by globalization and are progressing to be internationalized. In other words, the linguistic landscape in such cities may not be as complex as that in the multilingual society, yet its existence definitely echoes the language in use and the underlying ideology for use. Therefore, it is needed to conduct research to investigate the features of and the possible reasons influencing the distribution of the linguistic landscape in such cities, which can fill the gap of as well as provide evidence to strengthen and widen linguistic landscape theory. In this paper, Nanchang, capital city of Jiangxi, China is selected and specifically street name signs are used as the target for further study to explore the biliterate phenomenon.

The background information of Nanchang

Nanchang is the capital city (center of politics, economics, culture and education) of Jiangxi Province in central China. The total population is 5.184 million (2014 Census)[1]. The official language is mandarin, with a local variety, Gan dialect. Typically, it is a monolingual city.

For its prospect for city construction and future development, it was chosen as one among the Ten Most Dynamic Cities (News Weekly, 2006)[2]. Its economic development, especially the foreign trade has a great achievement on the wide international stage. According to statistics from Nanchang Investment Promotion Bureau[3], up to 2015, there have been more than 40 Fortune Global 500 foreign companies (Ford, Microsoft, Pepsi, Coco-Cola) investing and setting branches in Nanchang. Besides, the companies of Nanchang also actively invest or participate in construction projects in more than 8 other countries or regions (Georgia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Saudi Arab) with 26 contracted or performing projects.

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[1] Retrieved on http://www.nc.gov.cn/tzfw/tzhj/zyys/201011/t20101118_255816.htm, 18th October,2017
[2] Retrieve on http://www.newsweek.com/ten-most-dynamic-cities-112629, 18th October,2017
[3] Retrieved on http://www.nc.gov.cn/zwgk/tjsj/, 18th October,2017

In Addition, in 2015, the number of entry-exit passengers from Changbei International Airport was more than 500 thousand[4], nearly 10 percent of the total dwellers of this city.

To promote the further development, the national and provincial policies will shed light to its advancement: The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of Jiangxi Province (2016), a guideline for the regional development in China, lawfully assures the developmental goal to be a "core city along the Belt and Road" (an initiative for building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road by China for international mutual development) and an "international livable city"[5].

In all, both external globalization and internal drive for integration into global community, Nanchang is actively developing and shaping her outlook of internationalization.

Literature review

Linguistic landscape

The study on the language of signs can trace back to the 1970's (Backhaus, 2007; Spolsky, 2009). However, its impact on increasing attention from the sociolinguists and other academics only takes place after Landry and Bourhis's seminal paper in 1997, after which, it is considered as a subdiscipline of sociolinguistics (Backhaus, 2007), linguistic landscape.

According to Landry and Bourhis (1997), linguistic landscape is defined as the "visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (p.25). In specific sense, it refers to the language on the text "in public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combine to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration" (ibid).

Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) classified signs into 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' flow. In the same vein, Backhaus (2007) alternatively used the two terms as official and nonofficial signs. The former originated from different public bodies in terms of governmental, municipal, public/organizational or associative establishment. The signs or linguistic texts are created by designated agencies to deliver public authority to the "common citizens". The latter is from the more autonomous actors such as individuals or corporate bodies, generally sprouting from the public and addressing it on behalf of what they offer.

Landry and Bourhis (1997) outlined two functions of linguistic landscape. The first is the informational function which means the use of a specific language on a sign may be able to inform the public's expectations about the use of that language. It may suggest the right to use that language for public communication or indicate "the linguistic boundaries in a specific region" (p.27). The second is the symbolic function, meaning the "subjective ethnolinguistic vitality" (p. 27) of a language. In addition, Cenoz and Gorter (2006) presented a bidirectional function, which reflects the effects of sociolinguistic situation on linguistic landscape on one side, but on the other side, it may potentially change the individual's linguistic behavior, intentionally or unintentionally.

Studies on Street name signs

The issue of street name signs is more of the top-down flow with official characteristics. Most studies were conducted in areas where there are multidimensional languages by different ethnic groups reflecting regulation of ethnolinguistic and sociopolitical conflicts. There are several influential factors in these studies: the symbolic and psychological reference to the existence or nonexistence of a minor language on signage; the placement of various languages of the competing areas; the colonial influence on languages; the scale or the percentage of language speaking in a particular territory; the multicultural policies considerations.

For example, Quebec in Landry and Bourhis's (1997) study is a typical bilingual society in Canada. French is included in the governmental signs here is to show the French speakers' self-identity, prestige as well as status. There is further convinced by the study of Raento and Husso (2001), who also focused on a bi-official language state, Finland. The findings revealed that in this country, Finnish and Swedish are used by majority and minority respectively and the appearance of the languages and their placement on the road signs can mirror each language speaker's number or percentage in the country.

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[4] Retrieved on http://www.ncnews.com.cn/xwzx/ncxw/jrnc/2016-01/01/content_1490733.htm, 18th October,2017
[5] Retrieved on http://www.jxdpc.gov.cn/ghjh/ztgh/201603/t20160304_155077.htm, 18th October, 2017

In Wales, as in Jones and Merriman's (2009) research, the English-language writing of street names on the road signs caused a campaign by the Welsh inhabitants between 1967 to 1975. The nationalism in this place led the British parliament to change monolingual English boards into bilingual ones. Another study by Nash (1999) was in a colonized state, Ireland, where people launched a place name project, raising more questions of cultural identity, authenticity and diversity among precolonial, colonial and postcolonial traditions and languages. Even study of street name in China, like Zhao & Liu (2014), their target place is Dalian, Liaoning province, northeast China. However, like Nash (1999), this city is highly developed with multilingualism because it was colonized in history by different invaders.

It goes without saying that bilingual or multilingual societies are preferred to attract the researchers' attention and interest to study the linguistic landscape, which can yield several outcomes. However, the phenomenon of linguistic landscape in some other cities, which are developing and influenced by globalization cannot be ignored. Some cities, especially in China, though far from bilingual society, they are actively participating in international business. The planning and construction of cities from the perspective of linguistic landscape, more or less, can reflect their effort to be internationalized. Street name sign, the top-down and official category, can directly represent the municipal administration's attitudes towards an international outlook. Nanchang, chosen as the target city for this study, meets the above requirement. Therefore, this paper will further explore the situation and the possible reason of the street name sign in Nanchang with the following two research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the street name signs in Nanchang?
2. What are the possible reasons to account for such phenomenon?

Methodology

Following the methods in other linguistic landscape research, like Backhaus (2006) and Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), this study was conducted in field photographing survey method. In other words, there were several pictures being collected for analysis. For this study, considered the potential contact with more foreigners, three places were selected: Gaoxin District, where there are several foreign enterprises, Honggutan New District, where modern service industry is prosperous and Nanchang Metro Line 1, which links aforementioned two districts. Therefore, the street name signs appearing in the three areas were taken (see Picture 1-4. Note: The first three pictures are on the ground--Picture 1 and Picture 2 are in Gaoxin District, and Picture 3 is Honggutan New District, the last underground in Metro Line 1).

Data and coding

Data

There were 131 photos taken, among which 99 were from Gaoxin District and Honggutan New District on the ground and 32 were from Metro Line 1 underground (Table 1).

Coding

Cenoz & Gorter (2006) presented a variety of variables to develop the coding schemes. However, for this study, we just analyze the text, that is, the number of language and the languages on the sign will be involved. In all the signs photographed, only two scripts, the Chinese and Romanized alphabet, could be examined. To make it more specific, this study only focused on the equivalents of the two scripts/languages.

Findings and discussion

In terms of the languages on the street name sign pictures, it is without any effort to see that the Chinese language is prominent on any form of signs, indicating an absolute dominance. Beside, two types of biliterate signs can be categorized after coding: Chinese and transliteration by Pinyin and Chinese and proper nouns transliteration plus general nouns translation (Table 2). Detailed findings together with discussions that solve the two research questions will be presented in the following part.

Finding 1: Chinese is the prominent language

Here that the Chinese language is prominent refers to not only its appearance on all signs collected, but also the placement over the Romanized letter. As is contended by Scollon and Scollon (2003) and Backhaus (2007) that when the codes on the signs are complexly or ambiguously positioned or just simply left-right, top-bottom placed, the visibly larger ones could be seen as dominant. The pictures 1-4 can explicitly demonstrate this finding.

The absolute amount and prominent placement of the Chinese language suggest a dominance characteristics, which is in alignment with what Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) posited in that a power relationship can be used to explain the dominance of a code over another. In addition, Gorter (2006) stressed it is expected to reflect a general commitment to the dominant culture. As the official language in China, its legitimate status determines its distribution to be overwhelming, its font to be larger than other scripts and its spatial presence outstanding and attractive, especially on official street name signs.

Finding 2: Biliterate in the form of Chinese and transliteration by Romanized Pinyin

By biliterate, it means the combination of Chinese and Hanyu Pinyin which is transliterated with Romanized alphabet. It is worth noticing that alphabet is not a language but a script, and the two versions happen to coexist in written form on the sign forming a text, so this phenomenon can be defined as "biliterate" in this article.

On the sign, each Chinese character corresponds to an alphabetic "syllable" which can be pronounced with different tones. For example, picture 2 reads "高新七路", which means "High-tech Seven Road", is transliterated "GAO XIN QI LU" respectively. Among the 131 collected data picture, 102 photos are in this manner, taking up 78% in this study. In other words, all street name signs on the ground in the designated two districts follow this unified format, with 99 pictures, occupying 76%. Besides, there are another 3 pictures of the metro station name taken from the underground, holding 2%. Picture 5 is such a case in which the name is transliterated to "XIE JIA CUN (a village where Xie's families gathered)" from its original Chinese "谢家村". It should be noted that some irregular format is also included in this research. For instance, in Picture 6 (and in Picture 1), the Arabic number 2 is used to replace the corresponding characters " 二 " (two). Though irregular, they are readable and comprehensible to the audience.

According to Landry and Bourhis (1997), the "informational" function can "be used to communicate and obtain services" (p.25) in that it can clearly show the location and direction to the Chinese. The provision of Romanized alphabet, to a large extent, is to help the illiterate who can pronounce these alphabets to locate where s/he is and where to head. However, based on the statistics from UNESCO (2015) about the global literacy rate for all people aged 15 and above, China's literacy rate (including female and male) is 96.4%[6], which means the Chinese people may less rely on the Romanized letters. What function remains may be "symbolic" ornament of the signs or complement to the Chinese language.

On the surface level, the Chinese is directional while the alphabet can be regarded useless. However, in depth, the coexistence of Chinese and Pinyin on this kind sign echoes a consistent relation to the language policies both internationally and nationally. From the international perspective, in 1977, the Third United Nations Conference for Standardization of Geographic Names issued a resolution to allow China to use Chinese phonetic alphabet to write all Chinese geographical names. In 1979, Hanyu Pinyin was adopted by the United Nations Secretarial as the spelling form for personal and geographical names for People's Republic of China in all writings in roman characters. In 1982, decision ISO 7098 "Document Work-The Spelling of Chinese in Roman Characters" was issued by the Secretarial provides Hanyu Pinyin with a firm basis as the international standard of spelling Chinese in Roman alphabet[7].

While from the national perspective, in 2001, the People's Republic of China Government issued the National Common Language Law, providing a legal basis for applying Pinyin. The current specification of the orthographic rules is laid down in the National Standard GB/T 16159-2012, Basic rules of the Chinese phonetic alphabet orthography and the street names are named under GB 17733-2008 Geographical Names Sign[8]. These complicated sets of law, regulation and standard determine the language layout of street name signs, mirroring uniformity and national sovereignty; this can also explain why all street name signs are in the same manner or format.

Finding 3: Biliterate in form of Chinese and proper nouns transliteration plus general nouns translation

Unlike the pure Romanized alphabet text above, this type is the combination of Chinese and the Romanize equivalent which consists of two parts: the transliteration of the proper names and the semantic translation of the general names.

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[6] Retrieved on http://world.bymap.org/LiteracyRates.html, 18th October, 2017

[7] Retrieved on http://www.et97.com/subview/16231/16326320.htm, 18th October, 2017

[8] All documents retrieved on Retrieved from http://www.zsdmw.com/21, 18th October, 2017

For example, the metro name station in Picture 4 reads "八一广场", meaning "Eight One Square" (in memorizing the Uprising of the Chinese Communist to trigger the first shot in the Chinese Civil War on August 1st, 1927 in Nanchang). In this expression, "八一" is transliterated as "Eight One" (August 1st), while "广场" is translated into "square". Other examples can be found in the same way, like "青山湖大道" into "QINGSHANHU AVENUE" (Picture 7), in which the first half is the proper name of a lake-Qingshanhu, while the second half is the general reference, an avenue. The statistics in Table 2 shows that nearly all pictures from the underground station name are bilingual, 29 out of 32 (3 are transliterated), taking up 22% of the whole pictures taken.

It goes without saying that the official street name signs should abide the national policies to be transliterated with Pinyin. However, the situation in the metro system adopts a different manner with English on. It is easy to notice that unlike the on-the-ground signs which are geographically widely used, the signs around the metro are in a relatively limited scope. Thus, the metro operating company may have the autonomy to name the signs this way, showing "an exotic air" (Scollon and Scollon, 2003, p.119) or "modernity" (Zhao & Liu, 2014). It seems that this action violates the Chinese language laws and regulations. However, it may be an active try of the local government to cater to the globalization. In other words, for the goal of participating in the global issues, it is possible and flexible for the local government to try and create such a "foreign flavor" environment in the metro where it can control.

Furthermore, it is "practical" in that English as a globalized language (Philipson, 2003) can help the city to be potentially competitive in the process of globalization since it will be "informational" to the foreigners. What is more, the existence of such signs, according to Cenoz and Gorter (2006), may exert a bidirectional function: consciously or unconsciously influencing the acquisition of English language of the local inhabitants, which can help them figure out some problems confronted when visiting abroad.

Conclusion

The study of the street name signs in Nanchang reveals that the linguistic situation is biliterate with Chinese language as the dominance. At the same time, the underlying reasons for such phenomenon are explored either from the political or practical perspectives: to abide the law and regulations or to create a potential internationalized atmosphere. The local government tactfully combines the two together. However, it is worth noticing that the coexistence of two types of street names of the same street, simultaneously in Roman alphabet and English version like "QINGSHANHU DADAO" (Picture 1) and "QINGSHANHU AVENUE" (Picture 7), may confuse the foreigners on the road. Therefore, it is suggested to amend the regulations to keep the languages alike (Chinese and English translation version) so that a real international atmosphere can be established against the globalization.

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Table 1. Amount of photos taken in the three areas

	On the ground		Underground
	Gaoxin District	Honggutan New District	Metro Line 1
Numbers	58	41	32
Subtotal	99		32
Total	131		

Table 2. Types, languages, numbers and distribution of the biliterate signs

Type	Languages (scripts)	Number	Distribution
Chinese plus transliteration (Pinyin)	Chinese Roman alphabet	102(78%)	All on the ground (99, 76%) and underground (3, 2%)
Chinese plus transliteration (proper nouns) and translation (general nouns)	Chinese Roman alphabet English	29(22%)	Underground (29, 22%)
Total		131 (100%)	

Picture 1. Crossing sign

Picture 2. lamppost sign

Picture 3. Direction sign

Picture 4. Metro station sign

Picture 5. Metro station sign

Picture 6. Direction sign

Picture 7. Metro station sign