



Linguistic Landscape on Campus: A Case Study of a Thai University

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Abstract

“Linguistic Landscape” (or LL) is a notion that refers to both linguistic objects that mark the public space and the languages visible in a specified area. The main objectives of this study were to explore visible languages in the linguistic landscape of a Thai university campus and examine how languages are distributed in the specified areas. The research questions included: What are the visible languages in the linguistic landscape of the campus? And how are languages distributed in the specified areas? Photos of signs, posters, notices, announcements, and advertisements were taken by a digital camera and smartphones. The analysis of 305 photos revealed that the main constructions of signs consisted of monolingual signs (n=158, 51.80%), bilingual signs (n=141, 46.23%), and multilingual signs (n=6, 1.97%), respectively. Thai was found as the dominant language which stressed the official role of the language. In addition, the distribution of English in different types of signs highlighted its important role as an international language. Regarding the contribution of the study, its findings can be used not only as a basis for a comparative study of LL on campus but also useful information for policymakers or policy planners in examining a language policy or planning a language policy and its implementation on campus.

Keywords: *Thailand, linguistic landscape, English, Thai, multilingualism, campus signs*

1. Introduction

“Linguistic Landscape” (or LL) is a notion that refers to linguistic objects that mark the public space (Ben-Rafael, 2009) and the languages observable in a designated area (Jing-Jing, 2015). For example, Shohamy and Gorter (2009) included the languages appear in cities, markets, shops, schools, governmental and business buildings, campuses, beaches, and moving vehicles. Thus, the study of LL examines the usage of written languages in public space (Backhaus, 2006). Some LL studies, especially the ones investing LL in the city area focus on languages displayed on road and store signs. However, written languages or linguistic objects that are examined can appear not only on road or store signs but also on other forms such as announcements, notices, posters, or advertisements.

Based on Lefebvre’s concept of ‘space’, the linguistic landscape is considered as a sociolinguistic-spatial phenomenon (Lefebvre, 1991). In order to understand this phenomenon, it was suggested that Lefebvre’s three dimensions of space, namely, ‘spatial practice’, ‘conceived space’, and ‘lived space’ should be investigated for their interrelation (Trumper-Hecht, 2010). The first dimension, the spatial practice can be considered as objects resulted from human action in physical space while the conceived space, the second dimension, is the one as conceptualized by such key figures as politicians, policymakers, and policy planners. The last dimension, the lived space is the space as experienced by the residents of the area where symbols and metaphors are present. Accordingly, Trumper-Hecht (2010) considered these three dimensions of space as the ‘physical’, the ‘political’, and the ‘experiential’ dimensions of LL studies.

The word, ‘sign’ is defined as a notice giving information, directions, a warning, for example, a road sign or a store sign (“Sign”, 2019). Regarding types of signs, Landry and Bourhis (1997) stated that signs traditionally have been divided into two types, “private vs. government” and “top-down vs. bottom-up”. Others offer other terms such as “official vs. non-official” (Backhaus, 2006), or “private vs. public” (Shohamy, Ben-Rafael & Barni, 2010). While the private ones are “signs issued by individuals, associations or firms acting more or less autonomously in the limits of authorized regulations”, the other distributed by public agencies such as government or municipalities (Shohamy, Ben-Rafael & Barni, 2010). According to Akindele (2011) apart from linguistic meanings, the messages on signs can also reveal how diverse languages and cultures are in the specified area. Thus, it is crucial to examine signs in the LL study.



According to Backhaus (2005), the interest in LL study initially occurred in the area where conflicts of languages could be observed. In addition, the report by Landry and Bourhis (1997) is considered as the first place where the term “Linguistic Landscape” was first coined. Its focus was on perceptions of Francophone high school students of public signs in Canada. Nevertheless, the study of the language on public signage as a subject for linguistic research has started earlier than that. For example, in Asia, the history of studying language use in public spaces was found in Japan which was dated from 1972. A Japanese geographer, Masai (1972) used the term ‘linguistic landscape’ in his research, examining the language used on store signs in the Shinjuku area, one among key business centers in Tokyo. Other researchers, for example, Inoue (2000) focused on the issue of multilingual signs in Japan and integrated it into his theoretical framework of language and economy while Backhaus (2007) conducted a comparative study on signs of multilingualism in Tokyo, analyzing questions of actors and agents that were involved in the linguistic landscape.

The study of LL worldwide covered the main cities’ areas, tourist attractions, and higher education institutions. While the first two areas have been researched extensively, some studies conducted in the university campus were by Yavari, (2012) who compared signs in two universities located in two different countries, and Hynes (2012) who studied the political dimension of the signs on the campus of Cardiff University in Wales. In South Africa, Abongdia and Foncha (2014) examined language ideologies in the linguistic landscape in a university campus in South Africa. They revealed how the language ideology of an educational institution was reflected in its landscape which consisted of signs, billboards, notice boards, and buildings. However, they found a discrepancy between the language policy and the actual practice of the university under study. Thus, it was suggested that the language policy of an institution or a community should be portrayed by its linguistic landscape and people’s language practices. In Asia, aiming to extend the scope of LL study, Jing-Jing (2015) investigated multilingual university campus signs in Ito campus of Kyushu University, Japan. The purposes of the study were to explore regulations of campus signs, the constructions of languages, the formation of the linguistic landscape on campus, and the perspectives of signs readers. It was revealed that bilingual Japanese-English signs were indicated as the majority of campus signs and Japanese was the dominant language. The survey investigating students’ attitudes towards a multilingual campus also revealed that they chiefly valued bilingual ability for academic purpose and had some multilingual contact in daily life. Hence, the study of LL has viewed an essential part of an investigation into the implementation of a language policy in educational institutions.

In Thailand, a study of LL in 15 Bangkok neighborhoods by Huebner (2006) was considered as a pioneer. He revealed linguistic variation in the target areas and offered a model framework for the study of codemixing types. Other studies focused on tourist attraction areas. For example, a study by Rungruang and Yanhong (2013) who studied tourist attraction areas in Chiang Mai, found that the majority of the signs were bilingual: in Thai and English. The informational and the commercial were revealed as primary functions performed by the LL in the target areas. Moreover, the study provides various types of code-mixing on signs in the city. In the same way, Thongtong (2016) examined the signage on Nimmanhemim road, one of the key tourist attractions in Ching Mai, and reported the influence of English as an international language.

Ngarmpramuan (2012) also focused on tourist attractions. She concluded that Thai English appeared to closely relate to unique characteristics of Thai people, Thai language, Thai culture, and Thai society. Singhasiri (2013) studied linguistic landscape in the state railway station of Thailand. Only recently, a study was conducted in a Thai university campus (for example, Siricharoen, 2016). Thus, in Thailand studies of LL in other contexts such as higher education institutions are still underdeveloped whereas they play a vital role not only at national level but at an international level. Therefore, this study was set out to explore the linguistic landscape of a university campus in the northern part of Thailand. This university is unique for its policy of using English as a medium of instruction in almost all disciplines.

2. Objectives

This preliminary study has two objectives as follows:

1. To explore visible languages in the linguistic landscape of campus.



2. To examine how languages are distributed in the specified areas.

The two objectives have led to two research questions: What are the visible languages in the linguistic landscape of the campus? And how are languages distributed in the specified areas?

3. Materials and Methods

Campus signs were collected in the specified areas by a digital camera and mobile phones which allowed the researcher to collect large data files. Then these photo files were stored in a computer for further analysis.

The analysis of linguistic landscape was based on photos taken in the second semester, the academic year 2018 which was from January to May 2018. To ensure the validity of data collection, the researcher employed three areas for consideration as offered by Backhaus (2006). Highlighted in his study, three important areas included the geographic limits of the target areas, a clear determination of the signage, and the differentiation of various types of signage. In the present study, the target areas represented the living areas (a dormitory and a food center) and studying areas (a library and a building consisted of classrooms). The data were 305 photos which included the signage along the roads, pathways, and corridors, for example, inscriptions on the buildings, plate names on the shops, signboards at the parking spaces, buildings names, posters, commercial advertisements, notices, or announcements on the bulletin board. In addition, the data included all linguistic objects; hence, this means they consisted of both the top-down and the bottom-up types of signs. After all visible signs were collected, the data were examined for the number of languages displayed and the distribution of the languages.

In order to realize the objectives of the study, the data were analyzed using a script-based approach. In other words, the signs were firstly categorized by scripts which refer to the displayed languages on signs. As suggested by Gorter (2006), a sign coding scheme covers the investigation of how a language appears on the sign, where it is placed, what size and how many languages are included, the order of languages displayed on bilingual or multilingual signs, and the importance of languages, and so on. Accordingly, the data in the present study were categorized into three groups: monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual. Monolingual signs refer to a sign that contained only one language, and bilingual signs are the ones contained two languages. On multilingual signs, more than two languages are displayed.

4. Results and Discussion

The results are presented in accordance with the research questions of the study: what are the visible languages in the linguistic landscape of specified areas of this campus? And how languages are distributed in the specified areas?

The analysis of 305 signs, posters, and documents posted around selected areas in the campus revealed that the main constructions of them consisted of monolingual signs ($n=158$, 51.80%), bilingual signs ($n=141$, 46.23%), and multilingual signs ($n=6$, 1.97%), respectively (see Table 1). Similarly to other government organizations, the signs found on the research site were mainly created by the university which was considered a top-down or official type.

Table 1 The main constructions of the signage

Constructions	Number of signs	Percentage (%)
Monolingual signs	158	51.80
Bilingual signs	141	46.23
Multilingual signs	6	1.9
Total	305	100

Figure 1 shows examples of the monolingual sign that were created by the university and classified as a top-down type as the university was considered a governmental institution, and it has authority or control over activities on campus. This group of signs adds an international atmosphere to the campus as suggested by Jing-Jing (2015) who stressed the important role of the English as an international language.

As aforementioned, this university offers many courses in English; therefore, signs could contribute to the language policy of the university as well as accommodate international students studying in the campus.



Figure 1 Examples of the monolingual sign

In Figure 2 below, three examples of bilingual signs visible in the campus are displayed. The examples also illustrate different orders of languages on signs.



Figure 2 Examples of the bilingual sign

According to Table 2, of all 158 monolingual signs, it was revealed that Thai monolingual signs were found the most ($n=94$, 62.25%) followed by English monolingual signs ($n=63$, 41.72%). The finding showed that the dominant language in specified areas is Thai. The Thai-only signs are common in the campus and reflect the official status of the language. In this study, they were produced by the university and private agents or classified as both top-down and bottom-up types. The same picture was also found in the LL study by Jing-Jing (2015) who surveyed the linguistic landscape on Ito campus of Kyushu University, Japan and found Japanese-only signs the most. To a certain extent, the use of national or official languages in the two campuses could portray the identity of the universities. In contrast to the linguistic landscape of tourist spots, for example, Thongtong (2016) indicated that English only signs were found the most on Nimmanhemim road, one of the main tourist spots in Chiang Mai, Thailand. As these were the key areas for tourists, English signs were more likely to serve businesses in the areas; hence, this was suggested as the main influence of the use of the language.

**Table 2** Number and percentage of monolingual signs

Languages	Number of signs	Percentage (%)
Thai	94	62.25
English	63	41.72
French	1	0.66
Total	158	100

Regarding bilingual signs, Thai-English signs were the most frequently found (n=98, 69.50%), following with English-Thai signs (n=38, 26.95%), and Chinese-English (n=2, 1.41%), respectively (see Table 3). In a study by Rungruang and Yanhong (2013) which examined the signs in tourist attraction areas in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the majority of the signs found were bilingual. On the contrary, in the present study, the majority of the signs in the educational institution were monolingual, Thai. However, when focusing on bilingual signs, both studies revealed a similar result: Thai-English signs were found the most. When considering how languages were positioned on bilingual signs, it was suggested that Thai was the dominant language as it was placed first on the top following with English. The position of Thai indicated the status of the language, the national and official one. In addition, the main population of the campus which was Thai could be indicated as a key factor that influenced the position of languages on campus signs.

In the same way, the study by Yavari (2012) revealed that English was the most visible language on campus signs apart from the official language of each university, whether those in Europe or Asia. Cenoz and Gorter (2012) stated that this resulted partly from increasing intake of international students of university circles. This also reflects the same situation as that in the university under study which accommodates an increasing number of international students and lecturers. Due to the status of English, an international language, the visibility of English on signs, both monolingual and bilingual signs, around campus, has created an international atmosphere in the campus. Thus, the use of English on signs in educational areas and tourist spots has served different purposes.

Table 3 Number and percentage of bilingual signs

Languages	Number of signs	Percentage (%)
Thai & English	98	69.50
English & Thai	38	26.95
Chinese & English	2	1.41
English & French	2	1.41
Lanna dialect & English	1	0.70
Total	141	100

Regarding multilingual signs, Thai-Chinese-English signs were found most (4 signs) while only one Chinese-English-Thai sign and one English-Thai-Lanna dialect sign were found (see Table 4). These multilingual signs were mainly found at the university food center where students and staff of all nations would gather. However, of all the signs that were examined, the lowest number was the multilingual signs and this suggested that multilingualism was less likely to be promoted in the areas under study.

Table 4 Number and percentage of multilingual signs

Languages	Number of signs	Percentage (%)
Thai-Chinese-English	4	66.66
English-Thai- Lanna dialect	1	16.66
Chinese-English-Thai	1	16.66
Total	6	100

5. Conclusion

This preliminary study aimed to explore the visible languages in the linguistic landscape of the campus and examine how languages were distributed in the specified areas. Thai monolingual signs were



most frequently found which emphasized the dominant role of the official language. Regarding the distribution of languages, while the Thai-English ones were the largest group, English was found to pair up with various languages and this emphasized its role as an international language in this campus. This study has highlighted the importance of visibility and distribution of languages on campus signage. It was expected that the findings could be used as a basis for further comparative studies. Besides, the findings were expected to provide useful information for policymakers or policy planners in examining or planning a language policy and its implementation on campus.

Since this study focused on only two buildings represented studying and living areas, further study should cover the whole campus so it could portray the complete linguistic landscape of the campus. In addition, the sign functions on campus should be examined which is expected to provide an insight into the study in this context. However, the selection of the specified areas is very critical since some certain campuses may not consist of ethnic minority groups as residents of the campus. As a result, only a few common functions such as informational and commercial could be the ones covering the research site.

To add other dimensions such as political and experiential dimension, experiences of both Thai and international students studying in the campus and the views of university staff involved should be well investigated so that these could provide more insights into the study of linguistic landscape.

6. Acknowledgements

This study was financially supported by a grant of Mae Fah Luang University, Thailand. The researcher was especially indebted to volunteers, research assistants, and the university staff for their cooperation and assistance in this project.

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