

Linguistic Landscapes of Gentrified Localities: A Case Study of China

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Abstract. China is experiencing a rapid development in all aspects of its social life, and gentrification is one of the consequences of its global integration. The paper reveals how linguistic landscapes change under the influence of gentrification and aims to prove that localities are being scaled up in both global and second-tier cities. The authors examine commercial signs, advertisements and referential signs of gentrified localities in Beijing, Shenyang and Harbin and present them in a comparative analysis, which exposes a different nature of the alteration process. One of the major common tendencies revealed is the omnipresent usage of English as a distinction-making tool. Of particular interest are positive and negative consequences of the changing context.

1. Introduction

Cityscapes are rapidly changing in the era of ubiquitous globalization and urbanization. Alongside with external alterations, modern global cities are experiencing processes of socio-economic nature, commonly referred to as gentrification, westernization, McDonaldization and the like. In this paper, we place particular emphasis on the relationship between gentrification of urban space and subsequent shifts in the linguistic landscape of a locality as well as the linguistic repertoire of the community.

Gentrification in socio-economic discourse is understood as ‘upscaling of a neighbourhood and its inhabitants’ [1] or ‘the process of upgrading urban neighbourhoods’ [2]. This process is traditionally followed by old buildings being renovated and converted into upscale residences or shops, aimed at new affluent communities of middle-class citizens, who displace working-class occupiers [3]. The process started in the 1950s in USA and England and was initiated by local residents in specific neighbourhoods; yet in modern times it is fueled by large corporate developers [3] in quest of profit. Kudla in his monograph describes three waves of gentrification; modern cities are currently witnessing the third wave, which is characterized by urban entrepreneurialism and transformation of whole areas into new complex landscapes that integrate housing with shopping, restaurants, cultural facilities, open space, and employment opportunities [3].

Due to its complexity, the phenomenon of gentrification is frequently studied in relation to other social sciences; for instance, it is now one of the major topics for sociolinguistic research works. According to Papen, the process of upgrading an urban neighbourhood is reflected in the changing linguistic landscape of this same neighbourhood and continuously contributes to it [4]. The term ‘linguistic landscape’ was introduced by Landry and Bourhis and refers to ‘language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings’ [5]. These constituents are a significant part of urban landscapes; consequently, citizens’ satisfaction in these parameters of urban life changes the very perception of urban space, particular neighbourhoods and whole areas.

Currently one of the most frequently discussed tendencies in the LL of gentrified areas is the omnipresent usage of the English language. Following the ideas of Vandenbroucke, we support the view that English has become a prestigious language, which is used by entrepreneurs and chain-stores in non-Anglophone countries to scale up the value of both the neighbourhood and its businesses [1,6].

The English language serves as a marker and producer of social distinction [1], which in non-Anglophone countries further results in social inequity.

Turning to China, it is worth mentioning that two historical events—its joining World Trade Organization in 2001 and Olympic Games in 2008—mark China repositioning itself as a member of international community [7]. Henceforth, the LL of Chinese cities has changed. At present, English and other foreign languages are being introduced, but it has been proven that in the context of increasing consumerism [8] and social stratification, nonlocal language varieties become symbolic resources for achieving distinction [7,9]. As Pan puts it, linguistic changes caused by gentrification ‘invoke associations with a layered, stratified, and increasingly polarizing social structure, upon which meanings and validities are projected, evaluated, and judged’ [10]. Similarly, scholars discuss other possible side-effects of these alterations, which are adoption of alternative lifestyles, strengthening political power disparity, social inequity and the like [3,10]. Another research project of Gao suggests that the identity of the affluent middle-class Chinese is projected through consuming western products and code-switching to English [11], whereas among Chinese students the English language is a tool to improve one’s social status and to become ‘connected to the world’ [12]. Our study aims to exemplify the aforementioned tendencies and give evidence of gentrification not only in global megapolises, but also in smaller cities of China, as the phenomenon is also diffusing to second-tier cities [13].

2. Data and Methodology

Data for our research was collected during our field trip to China in July 2019. We photographed 303 linguistic objects (commercial signs, advertisements, elements of navigation and design) in gentrified areas of Beijing—a global city (241 objects)—and second-tier Shenyang and Harbin with 15 and 47 linguistic objects accordingly. We then chose only three localities: Sanlitun neighbourhood (三里屯) in Beijing, Chengkaizhongxin Business Area (城开中心) on Taiyuannan street (太原南街) in Shenyang and Huarunkaixuanmen residential complex (华润凯旋门) in Harbin, as they represent upscale areas and abound in most interesting findings.

Sanlitun is a hectic quarter, located in Chaoyang District of Beijing. It has been turned from a blank land into ‘the trend vane, bar street, and the cradle of Beijing night life’ [14]. Sanlitun is also famous for hosting embassies and being a haunt of expatriates and foreign tourists. This upscale area consists of several pedestrian streets with shopping centres and street retail boutiques and cafes.

Shenyang is the capital city of Liaoning Province and one of the largest cities in China. At present, the city is witnessing rapid development, with old buildings being demolished all over the city and replaced with new mixed-use high-rises whereas the downtown area is experiencing renovation. Taiyuannan street is one of the most popular streets in Shenyang among local inhabitants, tourists and expatriates, situated in the vicinity of Shenyang North Railway Station and rich in shops, malls and cafes. In 2019 local developers introduced Chengkaizhongxin mixed-use complex, which mushroomed in place of a chaotic market.

Harbin is a city in the northern part of China and the capital city of Heilongjiang province. Its eastern part is experiencing a boom of residential and commercial development, which results in many new residential complexes and malls erected in place of vast blank plots. For our analysis we chose Huarunkaixuanmen residential complex (华润凯旋门), situated at the crossroads of Haerbin (哈尔滨大街) and Zhongxing (中兴左街) streets and represents several multifamily high-rises and pedestrian areas with shops and cafes.

We analyzed all photographs using the method of relative values calculation and according to the adopted classification of multilingual signage representation, proposed by Pan [10]. Following the categorization, the first type is a monologic code and involves local representations of translocal linguistic resources, where the preferred code of communication is restricted to one foreign language.

The second type represents a dialogic approach with two languages used (one of them is the first). Additionally, we used Baidu Maps street-view service to trace back the changes in localities landscapes. We preserved the original spelling of all texts mentioned.

3. Results

The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1. We have identified that the biggest share of the English monologic code in a linguistic landscape is found in Sanlitun quarter in Beijing, whereas the LL of Huarunkaixuanmen residential complex in Harbin is witnessed in the lowest number of English monolingual signage. By contrast, the maximum share of Chinese monologic code is found in the analyzed locality of Harbin, whereas Chengkaizhongxin mixed-use complex in Shenyang is characterized by the absence of Chinese signage. The share of dialogic code is uneven with the maximum percentage in Shenyang.

Table 1. Results of Linguistic Objects Analysis.

Place \ Criterion	Sanlitun, Beijing	Chengkaizhongxin mixed-use complex, Shenyang	Huarunkaixuanmen residential complex, Harbin
share of English monologic code, %	82,5	20	4,2
share of Chinese monologic code, %	4,4	<i>Not Found</i>	87,3
share of dialogic code, %	13,1	80	8,5
total share, %	100	100	100

According to the results, entrepreneurs in Beijing mostly prefer to use the English monologic code to appeal to their potential customers. A minority favours either the Chinese monologic code or dialogic code. Consequently, the linguistic landscape of Sanlitun is drastically different from that of downscale parts of Beijing. The current LL of Chengkaizhongxin complex in Shenyang is characterized by the omnipresent multilingual signage, which was not the case before the redevelopment. In case of Huarunkaixuanmen residential complex in Harbin, the linguistic landscape may be described as monolingual with several exceptions. The gentrified nature of the place is mostly manifested in welcoming signs and navigational elements, introduced by the developer. Local small-scale businesses still prefer to stick to either Chinese monologic or dialogic codes.

4. Discussion

4.1. Sanlitun Neighbourhood (三里屯) in Beijing

Sanlitun consists of several malls and street-retail shops. The official website of Taikoo Li mall presents the following description of the place: *‘Taikoo Li Sanlitun represents a cosmopolitan approach to leisure, leading the way with up-to-the-minute lifestyle trends, an arty atmosphere and thoughtful service. Not only is this a place to shop to your heart’s desire, to satisfy your appetites, and to play—it’s also on the cutting edge of fashion.’* This approach is reflected not only in architecture, design and atmosphere, but also in the language used.

Alongside with brand-names, we documented the slogans, written only in English (*‘Bad Farmers save your life’*, *‘Some things are forever. This sale is not’*, *‘Baker & Spice. More than a bakery’*, *‘Friendly ice-cream store that gives the impression of having always been around’*, *‘Your daily ice-*

cream’, ‘Creating a new soft ice-cream culture’) and referential usage of English (‘Save up to 50%’, ‘Final Sale’) throughout Taikoo Li mall.

In the case of trendy café ‘Boom Pops’, appealing slogans outside the café are written only in English: ‘Here at the Boom Pops, we don’t just love food, we adore food. The pleasure of discovering, creating and sharing food is what inspired us to develop Boom Pops brand. Good food in all its forms: wholesome traditional, innovative, nurturing and nourishing is what drives us’ and ‘Boom Pops. Taste the future’; they greet visitors at the front door and are not accompanied by Chinese versions, whereas inside the place we noticed another slogan, written both in English and Chinese: ‘Feed your body, feed your soul. 健康的食物, 才能喂养的靈魂’. However, the Chinese version is placed beneath the English one as secondary, translated option. Additionally, the English appealing slogans mentioned above demand a high level of language proficiency and may not be understood by the local inhabitants, and yet they add a highly desirable western charm to the locality; they also serve as an indicator of prestige and wealth.

Another example is the advertisement of ‘Garden of Curiosity’, documented in one of the streets in Sanlitun. To promote an entertainment activity, entrepreneurs placed an extract from the poem ‘The Stolen Child’ by W. B. Yeats, without a corresponding Chinese conversion:

*‘Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world’s more full of
weeping than you can understand.’*

It could be used both as a distinction-making sign and as a tool to create the atmosphere of mystery and secrecy to attract visitors. Yet, as we have mentioned earlier, this sign remains ‘visible’ only to those fluent in English and might potentially be confusing for non-English speakers.

It is worth mentioning that the English language is also used throughout the street in the locality design. We documented several short inspirational phrases, designed in the form of hashtags—a tool of identification, used in social networking services: #BEEAGER, #BEBRAVE. This type of monologic signs makes a significant contribution to the whole atmosphere of trendiness, appealing to younger generations. English is used to create a fashionable form of design—hashtags, which are understandable only to active users of social media and English speakers but still hardly understood by older generations or non-English speakers.

In July 2019 some buildings in Sanlitun were in the process of renovation, which started several weeks prior to the date of our visit. Striving for upgrade, developers are likely to attract more affluent customers to the locality, when the renovation process is complete. Thus, in the future we can project a growing share of English monologic code.

4.2. Chengkaizhongxin Business Area (城开中心) in Shenyang

According to Baidu Maps street-view service, in 2013 this area represented a congregation of pavilions with shops selling day-to-day goods and cafes with local food. The linguistic landscape of the place in that time was homogeneous, and all commercial signs were written only in Chinese. In July 2019 Chengkaizhongxin complex was still nearing completion, but we could already estimate the would-be linguistic landscape of the gentrified locality.

Instead of small, authentic corners and cafes, visitors will enjoy Western-like bakeries, flower shops, posh restaurants and teashops. Alongside with small-scale businesses, Chengkaizhongxin is a new locality on the list of such famous giants as Adidas, McDonald’s and the like. Yet the shift in linguistic landscape representation is different from that of Sanlitun’s in Beijing. We photographed and analyzed 15 commercial signs and advertisements; however, only 3 of them were monologic in nature: ‘Adidas’, ‘L’amour de pique’ and ‘The North Face. Opening soon’. These linguistic objects were not translated into Chinese. It is also interesting to note the usage of the French language. The rest of the signage was

coded in both English and Chinese languages, yet English is mostly referential and thus used to give a brief introduction of the place: *'Huati. Flower Café. DIY Home Party'*, *'Coibaba. Juice / Milk Tea / Salad'*, *'Why Tea & Juice'*, *'Cotton Candy'*, *'W Juice and Coffee. Coffee | Fruit Juice | Milk Tea | Cake'*. We failed to find any signs, written in Chinese. Consequently, the linguistic landscape of the same locality was completely changed due to gentrification.

4.3. Huarunkaixuanmen Residential Complex (华润凯旋门) in Harbin

A vast majority of the signs documented was monologically rendered in Chinese. English and dialogic signs are rather exceptions. Starting from the proper name of the residential complex, we should mention that '凯旋门' in Chinese stands for English 'Arch of Triumph', which is a strategical solution of its developers aimed at recreating European style. We analyzed commercial signs and decorative elements on the pedestrian street between two houses. This street hosts street-retail corner shops, cafes, a pet shop and bookstore to satisfy daily needs of the local community. Visitors are greeted with decorative arches and the sign *'Welcome to Triumphal Arch'*, written only in English. Parallel to arches, the street is equipped with smaller navigational elements, which indicate locations of shops or cafes (*'Bookstore'*, *'handmade toys'*, *'juice company'*, *'LAUNDRY'*). Among all findings we documented only two commercial signs of English monologic nature: *'Shop Trolley'*, *'Lotus Spa. Nature beauty'*. The major function of the English language of dialogic signage remains referential: *'Flower'*, *'HeW Restaurant. Queen's Eat · Dessert · Snack /// Lifestyle'*.

5. Conclusion

As we have identified, the process of gentrification influences linguistic landscapes across China differently, yet all places are characterized by a growing share of the English monologic code. According to our findings, the most radical shift towards English-based signage and language commodification occurs in Beijing. Being a global megapolis and the capital city of China, Beijing attracts foreign specialists, tourists and affluent local clientele, who frequent new upscale localities. It is probable that targeting a new audience, developers strive to tailor their business to the context and create an atmosphere of trendiness and chic, using the English language as a distinction-making tool. Moving northwards, this influence becomes less tangible, the English language less sophisticated, mostly referential and more understandable to masses. Parallel to this, local entrepreneurs switch to other foreign languages (e.g. French), which adds *nonauthentic authenticity* to their places.

We can project a growing influence of the aforementioned tendencies on linguistic landscapes of gentrified localities and decreasing popularity of Chinese in coining brand-names or introducing commercial signs. This shift may serve as an impediment for non-English speaking members of Chinese society and contribute to social polarization and stratification. On the positive side, the omnipresent English signage may serve as a motivator for younger generations to learn foreign languages, as the language complexity demands a higher level of knowledge. Turning to the multilingual signage, China is becoming more attractive for foreign tourists, which is visionary before Winter Olympics of 2022.

Our research is restricted to only three localities in three different cities; however, the number of gentrified areas and alterations in their linguistic landscapes is constantly increasing. Additionally, the pace of redevelopment is ever-increasing. All these factors may lay the foundation for a deeper analysis of the relationship between gentrification and changing linguistic landscapes in the future.

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