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# **Awareness and evaluation of multilingual landscape: A look at the fluidity of written Chinese norms among Hong Kong migrants in Australia<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Departed as a study of ethnography of writing, the present study aims to find out characteristics of language practices and their social meanings of migrants in multilingual / multicultural society. The focus is placed on the written aspect of “linguistic repertoire”, a concept originally introduced by Gumperz (1964) to refer to the totality of linguistic forms regularly employed in the course of socially significant interaction. The data was collected from a linguistic landscape survey with 5 young Australians who either migrated from Hong Kong as a child or a second generation of migrants from Hong Kong. The findings suggest that their awareness and evaluation towards the use of Chinese characters on public signs were based not only on native or standard norms but also other norms available in contact situations. In addition, metalinguistic behavior such as self-management of various norms was found to be significant. The fluidity of norms in the subjects’ written repertoire supports the view of superdiversity (Vertovec 2006, 2007) in the way that language practices of individual language user in multilingual / multicultural

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society such as Australia are not necessarily bound by the traditional classification of minority groups (e.g. Hong Kong community or Chinese community) but rather a dynamic interplay of political, social and other variables.

## 1. Introduction

As pointed out by Anderson in her critical analysis of Chinatown redevelopment schemes (1990:137), the shift of Australian management strategy toward minority groups from one of assimilation / discrimination to cultural pluralism since 1970s has been reflected by efforts at multi-levels to promote exotic potential in the society. In terms of language use, the policy of the Commonwealth government to “encourage different cultural groups to share their distinctive heritage with their fellow Australians, and to encourage the mainstream to of society to facilitate the expression of this diverse heritage” (Commonwealth of Australia 1989:48) has certainly brought into existence an abundance of multilingual and non-English based signs and this has certainly largely changed the linguistic landscape in big cities such as Sydney and Melbourne in recent years. A basic question we want to ask here is: what do all these signs mean to local Australians?

Departed as a study of ethnography of writing, the present study aims to find out characteristics of language practices and their social meanings of migrants in multilingual / multicultural society. The focus is placed on the written aspect of “linguistic repertoire”, a concept originally introduced by Gumperz (1964) to refer to the totality of linguistic forms regularly employed in the course of socially significant interaction. By adopting the linguistic repertoire approach, language practices of migrants are not seen as a bounded entity traditionally studied under the notions of “language variety” (e.g. Labov 1972) or “ethnolect” (e.g. Clyne 2000). Rather, they are taken as selective (usually strategic) use of all the written resources

available to an individual in order to construct desirable social meanings.

The present study investigates the written repertoire of Hong Kong migrants in Australia through a linguistic landscape survey in order to find out possible answers for the following questions.

1. Are they aware of the use of written languages other than English in general and Chinese in particular?
2. How do they evaluate the use of various types of written Chinese characters such as traditional characters (繁體字)<sup>2</sup>, simplified characters (简体字)<sup>3</sup> and Japanese *kanji* (漢字)?
3. What kind of norms are their awareness and evaluation based on?
4. Are such norms rigid or flexible?

It is hoped that the present study can not only provide some evidence about the current situation of multilingualism in the Australian society but also inspires further investigation into various facets and layers of language use among migrants in the globalized setting.

## **2. Previous studies of linguistic landscape in multilingual society**

The study of linguistic landscape (LL) is relatively recent in the area of sociolinguistics. A widely quoted definition of the term can be found in Landry and Bourhis (1997). According to them, LL is the “visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region” (p.23). More specifically, it includes linguistic objects such as “public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs

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<sup>2</sup> Traditional Chinese characters are standardized written forms of Chinese mainly used in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

<sup>3</sup> Simplified Chinese characters are standardized written forms of Chinese mainly used in mainland China, Singapore and Malaysia.

on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (p.25). In the past 10 years, there has been an increasing research interest on LL particularly regarding to how languages are visually used in multilingual societies. As summarized in Table 1, empirical studies have been conducted in various parts of the world in order to find out the complex social realities as well as their underlying motivations and other symbolic meanings communicated through LL.

**Table 1: Some previous studies of linguistic landscape (LL)**

Year	Author(s)	Linguistic landscape areas	Languages concerned
2002	Hicks	Scotland	Gaelic signage, English
2002	Itagi and Singh	India	Multilingual
2003	Schick	Europe	English shop signs
2004	Collins and Slembrouck	Belgium	Multilingual shop signs
2004	Reh	Lira Town, Uganda	Indigenous languages
2006	Backhaus	Tokyo, Japan	Japanese scripts + English
2006	Huebner	Bangkok, Thailand	Thai + English
2006	Ben-Rafael <i>et al.</i>	Israel	Hebrew + Arabic + English
2006	Cenoz and Gorter	Ljouwert, the Netherlands Donostia, Spain	Friesian + Dutch + English Basque + Spanish + English
2008	Shohamy and Gorter (eds.)	LL: Expanding the Scenery	A collection of papers
2009	Coluzzi	Milan & Udine, Italy	Milanese + Friulian + Italian + English
2010	Shohamy, Ben-Rafael, Barni (eds.)	LL in the City	A collection of papers
2011	Lado	Valencia, Spain	Valencian + Catalan + Spanish
2012	Kayam, Hirsch and Galily	Cape Town, South Africa	English, Afrikaans and others

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. The subjects

Subjects in the survey included five young Australians (A1-A5). As shown in Table 2, A1 and A3 were university students whereas A2, A4 and A5 were high school students. They belonged to three families and had been friends since young age. Their parents were all from Hong Kong but they themselves were either born in Australia or migrated to Australia as a child. All of them can be regarded as native speakers of English although they also use Cantonese with their parents at home. All the subjects attended Saturday Chinese schools in Australia for a period ranging from three (A1) to ten years (A5). A1, A2 (brothers) in Family 1, A3, A4 (sister and brother) in Family 2 also received formal Chinese education while they were primary school students in Hong Kong. As for the second language in high school<sup>4</sup>, A1-A4 studied Japanese while A5 studied Italian.

Being all born in the 90s and having spent their adolescence in Australia in the 2000s, these youngsters can be said to be first generation in the era of globalization. While their language environment has been largely affected by national and family language policies under the ideology of multilingualism, their attitude towards language use which gradually emerges in a clearer shape is expected to give us important hints to look into the situation of multilingualism in the Australian society.

Cantonese speakers were chosen in the study mainly because Cantonese is a spoken language without an officially recognized written system to support. From the point of view of ethnography of writing, it will be interesting to find out how the subjects make sense of various types of written Chinese characters in their everyday

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<sup>4</sup> For more details about second language education in Australian high schools, please refer to Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009).

life in Australia as all of them were aware of the significant gap between Cantonese and written Chinese which is based on Mandarin.

**Table 2: Personal background of subjects in the survey**

Code	Family	Sex	Age	Status in Australia	Occupation	Place of Birth	Length of Stay in Australia
A1	1	M	20	PR*	university student	HK	9 years
A2	1	M	17	PR	Year 11	HK	9 years
A3	2	F	22	Citizen	university student	HK	10 years
A4	2	M	18	Citizen	Year 12	Australia	14 years
A5	3	M	18	Citizen	Year 12	Australia	18 years

\*PR: permanent resident

### 3.2. Data collection

Similar to other ethnographic studies, the present study is devoted to the collection of data by considering multiple sources of information (cf. Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein 1997:13-14), rather than merely facts as reflected by, for instance, literacy tests. Altogether four types of data were collected.

#### (1) Multilingual landscape survey

The five subjects were given 3 photo albums for analysis, each containing 30 photos of signboards taken by the researcher in three areas in Melbourne: Box Hill, Springvale and City. There are two main reasons for choosing these three areas. One is that all the subjects reported that they were familiar with these areas. The second and more important reason is that the use of Chinese characters in these three areas can be considered as significant and unique. For instance, with a

large Chinese community in Box Hill (about 20% of the local population), signs written in both traditional and simplified characters are prominent in the area. The largest ethnic community in Springvale is Vietnamese (about 25% of the local population). It is interesting to find that other than Vietnamese, many signs in this suburb are written in traditional Chinese mainly because a large number of first generation Vietnamese migrants was of Chinese origin. As for Melbourne City, the use of traditional, simplified Chinese characters as well as Japanese *kanji* is prominent especially in the vicinity of Chinatown due to the concentration of Chinese and Japanese restaurants<sup>5</sup>.

A questionnaire with linguistic items extracted from the photos and the following questions was also used as a guide during the interviews.

- a) What is your general impression about the multilingual signs here?
- b) What is your impression of this sign at the first sight?
- c) I guess this sign is designed for \_\_\_\_ to read.
- d) If you need to keep the information of this sign for later use, what kind of message can you catch from this sign?
- e) What do you feel about the language / dialect used here? (e.g. Japanese style, Mainland Chinese style, Hong Kong style, strange font, very formal, very foreign...)
- f) Do you notice any writing / grammatical / spelling mistakes here?

The average length of interview with each subject was approximately 100 minutes.

## **(2) Language biography interviews**

Following Nekvapil (2003) and others, a language biography interview with

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<sup>5</sup> According to the 2006 Australian Census, only 254 residents in the City were of Japanese origin. Nevertheless, the majority of Japanese restaurants in Melbourne can be found in this area.



each subject was also conducted. The main objective of this interview was to collect data about the subjects' language learning history, assessment of their language learning process, linguistic and intercultural experiences.

### (3) Semi-structured interviews about daily language use

In order to raise consciousness about their multilingual environment, the subjects were also asked to participate in a semi-structured interview regarding to how they use language in daily life. These interviews were conducted in several occasions when the researcher was invited as a guest to their homes.

### (4) Interviews with parents

One parent from each of the 3 families was also interviewed in order to obtain a fuller picture of the subjects' language background, language environment as well as related language policies in their family.

## 4. Diversity of awareness



Photo (1)

Awareness and evaluation of multilingual landscape:  
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Photo (2)



Photo (3)

On the basis of the data mentioned above, diversity of awareness towards the multilingual landscape in the three Melburnian areas was found to be significant in the following aspects.

**(1) Awareness of multilingual signs**

All the subjects in the survey expressed that they were well aware of signs written in languages other than English in the three areas (e.g. Photo 1) due to increasing number of migrants (Box Hill and Springvale) and visitors from overseas (City). They explain that this is because Melbourne is a multicultural city and that there are new migrants and senior migrants who are not literate in English. However, when they were asked if multilingual signs should be encouraged or not, only A3 answered “5” (very much so) on a 5-point scale. A1 and A4 gave a conservative “4” considering that it provides equal opportunities. A5 was neutral (“3”) and A2 was more on the negative side (“2”).

**(2) Awareness of signs written in Chinese characters**

As revealed in the language biography interviews and interviews with the parents,

reading and writing of Chinese based on characters (rather than Romanization) was particularly emphasized in the Saturday Chinese school curriculum and encouraged at home. Nevertheless, all the subjects reported that they do not usually look at the Chinese characters written on signs although they visit the 3 areas regularly, mainly for eating out and shopping with their parents. A1, A3 and A4 said they will look at the Chinese characters if they are eye-catching but they have little intention to read them out or to remember them for later use. A2 expressed frankly that “it is a waste of time”, and “they have nothing to do with me”. A5 did not even notice that the two signs in Photo (2) belonged to the same shop (written in Chinese characters on the left hand side and English on the right hand side).

### **(3) Awareness of signs written in traditional characters and simplified characters**

All subjects believe that they are able to distinguish traditional characters and simplified characters on signs although very often they do not know the reading and the meaning. All except A5 expressed that they feel closer to traditional characters. This is unexpected because written Chinese taught in the Chinese Saturday schools where the subjects attended was based on simplified characters and *pinyin*. They explain that they feel closer to traditional Chinese as they have more contact with Hong Kong culture through movies, songs and the internet. Needless to say, this is also partly due to the influence from their parents and their fading childhood memories in Hong Kong. A1 added that he was once allowed to submit homework in traditional Chinese in his school but he got more and more confused with the two systems. Later, he made a rule for himself and that was to stick to the traditional ones. A5 was the only subject who indicated preference to simplified characters only if he had to choose. According to A5's mother, A5 started to learn Chinese in traditional characters but he was overwhelmed by the complicated forms. A5 said he

has forgotten almost all the Chinese he learnt in Saturday school since he finished the program (Year 1-10) two years ago.

A1, A3 and A4 said they could recognize more simplified characters than what they learnt in Chinese school. As they explain, it is mainly because they often use *pinyin* to retrieve Chinese characters in order to chat with their friends on SKYPE or FACEBOOK. They said it is very helpful since they are not able to input Cantonese characters on the keyboard. A2 said he used to input with *pinyin* when chatting with friends in China and in Malaysia when he was in primary school. However, he does not write Chinese at all now in high school as has developed a network with only English speaking people in spite of the fact that some of them are of Chinese background.

#### **(4) Awareness of signs written in Japanese *kanji***

As mentioned in the previous section, all the subjects except A5 chose Japanese as their second language in high school. Although A5 did not study Japanese, he reported that he can very often identify Japanese *kanji* based on the writing style of the characters. As for A5, characters used by Chinese usually have more corners whereas those by Japanese have more curves, such as the characters “东京” in Photo (3)<sup>6</sup>. A1 and A4 were able to pronounce correctly Japanese on signs such as “日本料理”, “居酒屋”, “お持ち帰り出来ます” although they admitted that it was easier for them to read Japanese *kanji* in Cantonese. A2 and A4 were also able to notice the unnatural use of Japanese such as “居食屋”, and the mismatch of *kanji* names and their Romanization in some Japanese restaurants in Melbourne City. As for writing practices such as doing Japanese homework, brothers A1 and A2 reported

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<sup>6</sup> The two characters “东京” in Photo (3) should be considered as simplified Chinese. Their Japanese equivalents are “東京”.

that sometimes they have to rely on *pinyin* in order to retrieve Japanese *kanji* which share the same shape in Chinese. Reports in the interviews suggest that rather than actual ability of Japanese, their awareness or sensibility of Japanese *kanji* was found to be more related to their admiration of Japanese culture and their frequent contact with Japanese *manga*, animation and computer games.

## 5. Diversity of evaluation



Photo (4)



Photo (5)



Photo (6)

Similar to awareness, evaluation regarding to the multilingual landscape in the three areas in Melbourne was also found to be diverse. In the survey, very different opinions were collected from the subjects about what they think about the reading, writing and meaning of characters used on the public signs.

### **(1) Evaluation of pronunciation: Based on what language?**

The name of the shop in Photo (4) is written in both Chinese characters (“人人”) and in Romanization (“*Yang Yang*”). Although A5 was not confident about his Chinese, he analyzed that “人” should be pronounced as “*ren*” in Mandarin and “*yan*” in Cantonese and thus neither will become “*yang*”. A1 suggested that the name “*Yang Yang*” was based on English so there was no relationship between this reading and the characters “人人”. A2 also supported his brother A1, saying that “may be they want to adopt the English culture”. A3 on the other hand believed that the reading of “人人” must be based on a Chinese dialect which he does not know. Similarly, A4 was unable to find any clues about the relationship between “人人” and “*Yang Yang*”. His conclusion was “it sounds like Cambodian. This is not Cantonese”.

### **(2) Evaluation of vocabulary: Based on Mandarin or Cantonese?**

When the subjects were shown a photo of an advertisement about souvenirs from Australia and New Zealand (Photo 5), all except A5 were able to notice two place names there, one is “澳洲” and another one is “新西兰”. While “New Zealand” is normally known as “紐西蘭” in Hong Kong, A1 indicated honestly that he was unsure whether “新西兰” and “紐西蘭” are the same place or not. Unlike A1, A3 said she did not care too much about the subtle differences of writing because, as she explained, no matter whether it was written as “新西兰” or “紐西蘭”, she would read it in English: “New Zealand”.

As for “澳洲”, A4 commented that since “新西兰” on the advertisement is a place name based on Mandarin, they should have used the Mainland Chinese version “澳大利亚” instead of the Hong Kong version “澳洲” in order to be consistent. A2, however, appeared to be more flexible and practical. He said that he always prefers “澳洲” and not “澳大利亚” for Australia because “two characters are better

than four characters”. Although it is not consistent, writing “Australia” as “澳洲” can save space.

### **(3) Evaluation of writing style: Calligraphic variations or different characters?**

With regard to a sign in Springvale (Photo 6) containing a variant form (異体字) “金” in “金行” (jewellery shop), the subjects appeared to be uncertain. A4 hesitated if it was a printing error and wondered why the character “金” which he knew was also used on the same sign together with this variant form. He expressed directly that “Why are they printed in a different way? It looks very weird!”. A1’s evaluation of this variant form on the other hand seems to relate to the context. He commented that “it looks Vietnamese, this writing doesn’t look like Chinese, I think it is Vietnamese Chinese”.

Other than variant forms of writing, all subjects appeared to have difficulty to distinguish Chinese characters written in calligraphic and aesthetic styles.

### **(4) Evaluation of orthographic writing: Correct or incorrect?**

When the subjects were asked if they noticed any writing or grammatical mistakes regarding to the use of Chinese characters on the signs, all of them appeared to be less strict for two reasons. Firstly, as reported above, they do not usually look closely to the use of Chinese. Secondly, they are not confident to judge as they believe that they themselves also make a lot of writing mistakes. Nevertheless, two possible misuses of Chinese characters on the photos were pointed out. One was the use of “游” in “旅游” on a travel agent sign. Another one was “發” in “染發, 燙發” on the menu of a hair salon. While both A1 and A3 believed that characters “遊” and “髮” should have been used in the two cases respectively, they indicated a possibility that it may be the way people use in mainland China.

## **6. Fluidity of norms of written Chinese in multicultural setting**

While a primary goal of sociolinguistics can be said to be the pursuance of the social meaning of language, it is important to pay attention to the fact that, as pointed out by Benor (2010) and others, social meaning of language is not a fixed commodity; rather it changes according to the context and negotiation in interactions, partly based on contrast or distinction (ibid:160).

In order to find out characteristics of the written repertoire of migrants in multilingual societies, the previous two sections examined how the five subjects in the survey noticed and evaluated the use of Chinese characters on public signs in areas where they were familiar with. Diversity was found both at the stage of awareness and evaluation and thus it is interesting to find out what kind of norms in their written repertoire was used for such awareness and evaluation.

In his discussion of evaluation of norm deviations between foreigners and Japanese contact situations, Neustupny (2005) pointed out that in the traditional paradigm of cross-cultural communication and foreign language education, more emphasis, if not the sole emphasis, was placed on “native norms”, in other words, norms which are considered to be correct in native situations. In more detail, people tend to perceive and solve problems by relying on the principle of “When in Rome do as the Romans do” or “郷に入っては郷に従え” in Japanese. While he accepts the importance of the principle of cultural relativism, he suggests that in the case of Japanese and non-Japanese contact situations, “as foreigners penetrate more and more into Japanese society, it will be increasingly important not to simply accept and acquire Japanese norms, but to carefully consider how to find and apply norms that are in some sense correct in the situation under consideration” (ibid:310). As hypothesized in his paper, other norms which can be referred to as “contact norms” (i.e. norms considered to be appropriate in contact situations), “dual norms” (i.e. norms of two systems, from



which one system is selected), and “universal norms” (i.e. norms based on universal principles) in multicultural society can also be taken into consideration (ibid:311).

By examining the findings presented in the previous two sections, it is not difficult to find that norms other than native norms (e.g. what is considered to be correct and / or appropriate in standard written Chinese and in the Australian society) were used by the subjects for the perception of the multilingual landscape in the three areas in question. For instance,

- (1) Use contact norms: The majority of the subjects did not show too much concern about the use of various types of Chinese scripts in Australia simply by accepting that “because it is a multicultural society here so that’s fine” (A5).
- (2) Use dual norms: e.g. A4 accepts both the written form of “新西兰” and “紐西蘭” as for her in either cases, she will pronounce it in English: “New Zealand”.
- (3) Use shared norms: e.g. Subjects who studied Japanese in high school apply their knowledge of *pinyin* to retrieve words in Mandarin, Cantonese and Japanese.
- (4) Use universal norms: e.g. the subjects very often emphasized the importance of “equal opportunity” and “user-friendly, as it can help people who don’t speak English and it’s fair” (A1), an important view in modern societies.
- (5) Use global norms: e.g. A5 said “I just look at the English”, knowing that this always works because English has become an international language in the globalized world.
- (6) Use no specific norms: e.g. the subjects very often simply accept the use of multilingual signs by using no specific norms, e.g. “It’s natural for me” (A3).

(7) No evaluation: “It has got nothing to do with me” (A2).

Multiple resources obtained from interviews other than the main LL survey suggest that the subjects have attempted to manage the above linguistic norms in at least the following ways.

- (1) Expand multilingual repertoire by acquiring new native norms: e.g. become aware of the use of Japanese *kanji* and watch Japanese videos (A1, A2, A3, A4).
- (2) Minimize or avoid totally unwanted norms: e.g. A5 did not attempt to maintain his Chinese after having finished the Chinese program.
- (3) Systematize new norms by self-management: e.g. insist to use only traditional characters (A1).
- (4) Focus on global norms such as using English as an international language: e.g. only make friends with English speaking people in high school (A2).
- (5) Feel free to use dual norms: e.g. accept the use of simplified and traditional Chinese characters (all subjects).
- (6) Take advantages of shared norms: Use *pinyin* to retrieve traditional, simplified and Japanese characters (A1, A2, A3, A4).
- (7) Create contact norms through active participation in contact situations: e.g. made friends with migrants; eat and shop in migrant communities (all subjects).
- (8) Accept or become more tolerant of different norms: e.g. do not care too much about misuse of characters (all subjects).

## 7. Concluding remarks

In his influential 2006 paper, Vertovec discussed the emergence of superdiversity in Britain. He claims that it is crucial to “look beyond multicultural diversity” as many societies today are experiencing “wholly new and increasing complex social formations”,

which is marked by “dynamic displays of variables such as language, religion, migration channels and immigration statuses, employment, gender, age, location and transnationalism”. Obviously, superdiversity is not simply a state of more complicated multiculturalism, or the presence of more cultures in one society. Rather, as emphasized by Vertovec and others, superdiversity should be understood as “diversification of diversity”. Unlike multilingualism is very often seen as a piece of mosaic (e.g. Seargeant 2009), superdiversity may be more like a bird’s nest, which is multidimensional in nature.

The fluidity of norms used for the perception of multilingual landscape by migrants in Australia as evident in my data supports the multidimensional view of superdiversity in the way that individuals are given more space to search for and test different types of norms that would best fit in their personal life.

As it was indicated by Jorgensen and Juffermans (2011), “a consequence of this superdiversity is an increasingly important lack of predictability”. Blommaert (2010) also observes that “the presuppositions of common integration policies - that we know who the immigrants are, and that they have a shared language and culture - can no longer be upheld”.

As boundaries of speech communities and ethnic groups have become more and more ambiguous, I suggest that it is important to continue our discussion on possible alternative concepts for the study of language as well as social science in general. It will be of equal importance to look further into the trajectory of language learning among individual learners so as to find out the mechanism of how they orient themselves in order to make sense of the world.

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