# Semiotic influences of Linguistic Landscapes in the Little Japan Towns in Ho Chi Minh City-Vietnam

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| A R T I C L E   I N F O | A B S T R A C T |
|---|---|
| | **Purpose** The research aimed to study the sense of permanence of interaction between Japanese culture and local Vietnamese culture through monolingual, bilingual and multilingual signboards in the Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC), the most populous and industrialized metropolis in Vietnam. The purpose was to examine how Linguistic landscape research focuses on the relationships between written languages in public spaces and the social structure. |

**Methods** This research study adopted a theoretical and practical background study approach to study the linguistic landscape theory, using the quantitative method of research. A total of 436 images were collected including signboards, notice boards, billboards, etc. from three districts identified for the study. The acquired data was categorized into two primary groups: one based on the functional scope and the other on linguistic composition. The data analysis methods included image analysis, conceptualizing and investigating the signboards in their contexts. The paper also used the method of discourse analysis to explore how language policies affected the linguistic landscape in the surveyed areas. **Findings** The data yielded from all three survey areas, in all linguistic components, revealed a higher frequency of English, as compared to other languages (e.g., Japanese and Vietnamese). The statistical results showed many disparities in the linguistic landscapes which contributed to creating a picture of a common linguistic landscape. It was also evident that English and Japanese were prioritized in usage as compared to Vietnamese. **Implications for Research and Practice:** The study would help better understand the Japanese community living in Vietnam. Its findings would be applicable in practical situations such as teaching Japanese in Vietnamese educational institutions, as a good supplement to teaching form books and classroom teaching.

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## Introduction

Since the 1970s, linguists all around the world have studied signboards as a part of semiotics and sociolinguistic patters, without considering the linguistic landscape that these signboards existed. However, in 1997, following the publication of Landry and Bourhis's (1997) essay establishing the linguistic landscapes, this genre officially became a new and significant field of study. Landry and Bourhis had stated: "The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration." (Landry & Bourhis, 1997).

In recent years, linguistic landscapes have been developed as a field of research that blends applied linguistics, sociology, psychology, cultural geography, and others. Linguistic landscapes comprise all phenomena and images deliberately made by humans, each of which immediately reflects the will of the creators. In today's urbanized world, the number of signboards and billboards has increased significantly. In addition, the signboards are designed and constructed with a high degree of professionalism, with the owners' requirements in mind. The diversity of the linguistic landscapes is linked to the development of the area in the economy, commerce, tourism, etc., and highlights the key qualities, aspirations of the people, and policies of the authorities in that area. In a way, they shaped the urban environment, the linguistic landscapes of the city, and contemporary society (Zylberberg et al., 2012).

Japan is a nation with a long history of formation and development. According to Japanese history, people from Japan began to migrate in the early 12th century, and this migration was particularly explosive in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The arrival of the Japanese to different regions of the world, particularly in Southeast Asia, influenced the development of that area. In many nations, dedicated regions for the Japanese people were established, which are usually called Japan Town or Little Japan Town. They can be found in more than 20 nations. In Vietnam, the Japanese migration started in the sixteenth century, settling mostly in big ports and urban areas, focusing on economic, social, and political development. During this period, the Japanese communities with their language and culture have blended with the Vietnamese (Kunert et al., 2012).

Ho Chi Minh is a big huge city in a favorable location, with a long history of development, and is regarded as the country's center of economic and commercial growth. This location's linguistic landscapes also feature its distinct socio-cultural imprints. Although the Japanese neighborhoods in the city are modest in size, they have always been an integral component of the urban landscape. This paper examined the linguistic landscape of the Little Japan Towns in Ho Chi Minh City, which included Little Japan Town in the 15A - 15B alley between Lê Thánh Tôn and Thái Văn Lung Street, District 1; the Little Japan Town in Phạm Viết Chánh Street, Bình Thạnh District; and the Little Japan Town on Thảo Điền Street, Thảo Điền Ward, Thủ Đức City, Hồ Chí Minh City.

The linguistic landscape in the aforementioned neighborhoods were focused upon in this paper, utilizing the approach of collecting image data from fieldwork surveys, statistics on the frequency of the languages, and synthesizing the main factors that made up the linguistic landscapes. The findings of the research, survey, and analysis, answered the following questions: How many languages are found in the surveyed areas? What are the

characteristics of the linguistic landscapes of each surveyed area? How does the occurrence frequency of these languages reflect the linguistic attitudes of the inhabitants of these areas? How does Cross-Cultural Communication manifest itself within the linguistic landscapes? The purpose of this article was to contribute new data and documentation of the linguistic landscapes of Little Japan Towns, in particular, and the urban linguistic landscape of Hồ Chí Minh City, in general.

## Literature Review

Several research studies have contributed new perspectives to the genre of linguistic landscape, following the definition of linguistic landscape given by Landry and Bourhis (1997). For instance, Scollon and Scollon (2003), facilitated with theories in language communication and explained the meaning of public texts such as signboards and their importance in the social and physical world with the help of real-life examples, they proposed the concept of "semiotics", which is the study of the formation and meaning of semiotic combinations, and introducing novel and significant aspects to the theoretical portion of linguistic landscapes. Likewise, Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) suggested adding the concept of "semiotic landscape" with language in order to construct and interpret a location or a place, as they believed all landscape as semiotic, with their meaning always construed in the socio-cultural context. However, Scollon and Scollon (2003) disagreed and made a qualified distinction between semiotic and non-semiotic spaces; semiotic landscape meant, in the most general sense, any (public) space with a visible inscription made through deliberate human intervention and meaning-making. Shohamy et al. (2010) further clarified this phenomenon by introducing new and more engaging dimension for readers of multilingual perspectives in urban contexts, focusing on contemporary urban linguistic landscapes. This study explored focused on variations in the linguistic landscape, beyond linguistic context, by explaining the interactions between signboards, billboards, and the urbanization process in urban areas.

Linguistic landscape research has largely concentrated on public signs and contemporary social and cultural realities since its inception as a field of study. Major cities throughout the world serve as the sites for a wide variety of studies. MacGregor investigated the effects of English on Tokyo's linguistic landscape (MacGregor, 2003); Griffin studied the invasion of the English language in Rome (Griffin, 2004); inspected the multilingual linguistic landscape in Bangkok; Backhaus surveyed the linguistic landscape in Tokyo, which took a more comprehensive approach to logogram and provided additional perspectives on urban multilingualism (Backhaus, 2006); Coluzzi conducted surveys and research in Brunei (Coluzzi, 2010); Mee Ling Lai, through synthesis and analysis, showed the degree of multilingualism in Hong Kong and how prominent the influence of the People's Republic of China is after the change of sovereignty (Lai, 2013); Manan et al. (2015) explored the linguistic landscape of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia with multilingual, multi-ethnic, multi-religious phenomena; Hult (2014) researched bilingual spatial systems in the US, followed by research on language policy and linguistic landscape planning (Hult, 2018);

Other researches included a Master's dissertation of Do Thi Mai Phuong (2018) on the characteristics of shop signs in the area of Hanoi city; Kohler (2018) demonstrated how semiotics, bilingual education, and linguistic landscape studies can together provide an interdisciplinary approach; Karolak (2020) depicted the social hierarchy, and official

government policies related to language use in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) region; Soukup (2020) examined a few unresolved issues in the selection of survey areas and the system of linguistic landscape studies; Woo and Nora Riget (2022) have conducted a linguistic landscape study in two major seaport cities of Korea and Japan, Busan and Yokohama, to show how useful the language on the signboards can be for the local people; Woo and Nora Riget (2022) conducted a small-scale study on the linguistic context of two terminals of Kuala Lumpur International Airport; Sheng and Buchanan (2022) studied the local linguistic landscape and the characteristics of the traditional visual language, showing the dominant position of the Chinese language; and Akmaljonovna and Usmonalievna (2022) conducted a linguistic analysis of the linguistic landscape of major regions of the world at large.

All of the aforementioned research studies have emphasized the benefits of speaking many languages, with special emphasis on the impact of bilingualism and multilingualism. Research into the widespread use of English in non-English speaking regions has also grown in scope and depth. Till date no research has been conducted to study the linguistic landscapes of the little Japan towns in Ho Chi Minh City-Vietnam. Hence, a need was felt to understand the linguistic landscape in the light of the theories established by previous studies.

## Theoretical Background

As made clear in the aforementioned description, the term "linguistic landscape" is often used to refer to the depiction of public spaces in both visual and verbal forms. Linguistic landscape research not only examines the language scripts used on the signboards of stores, but it also covers other forms of textual expressions such as warning boards, notice boards, ban signs, instruction boards, slogan boards, banners, billboards, ads on buildings or poles, graffiti, etc. It is generally accepted in linguistic landscape studies that the landscape can be categorized according to its functions (Giovinazzo et al., 2012). Landscape studies can be classified into two categories: (1) Top-down signs, also known as official signs, which originated from the state administrative system and public advertising; (2) Bottom-up signs, also known as informal signs, which are found in daily activities of shop owners and companies, such as store names, business names, billboard (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). Figure 1 illustrates the formal and informal levels of texts in the linguistic landscape, as considered to be classified into top-down and bottom up signs.
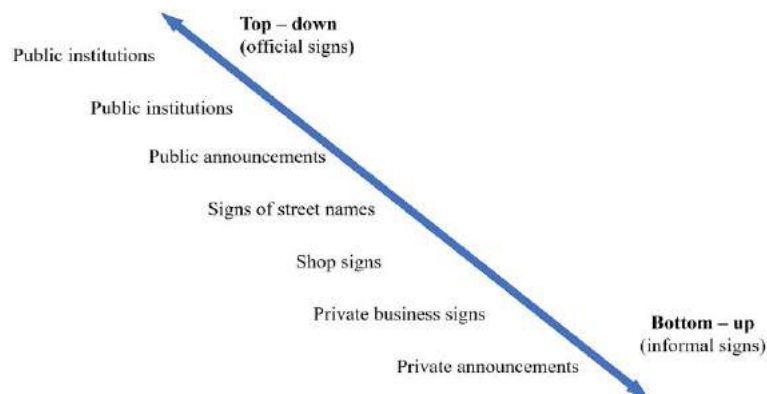
**Figure  1.** *Classification of linguistic landscape*
(Source: Ben-Rafael et al. (2006))

Landry and Bourhis (1997) classified the purposes of language as either "informative function" or "symbolic function." The informative function comprises words, signs, and symbols that informed the public (including notice, instructions, warnings, ads, etc.). The informative function also serves as a marker for the territory occupied by a specific language community, setting apart the boundaries between the territories inhabited by different language groups. The informative function is also expressed in whether one language or multiple languages are used for communication or commercial purposes. When multiple language communities compete for influence in a given region, the power and status of each language can be reflected in the informative function. The symbolic function, on the other hand, is the ability to convey meaningful messages, contributing to the characteristic culture of that social community. The symbolic function is formed based on the value and power of a language relative to other languages coexisting in the same area and linguistic landscape. It can be said that a society's linguistic attitude and language policy are connected to the symbolic function of language.

Typically, a typical sign consists of the four components: (1) Type: Type of operation, type of business, for example, company, store, shop, agent, or shop; (2) Brand name: a brand is the most prominent and attention-grabbing information on a store sign. The brand represents the business owned by the owner; (3) Content of signboard: it gives the detailed information about the products or services that the store provides to customers; and (4) Contact information: Information about the address and how to contact the business, though less prominent in the overall look of a store sign. In addition to the aforementioned, the signboard also features supplementary components like images, logos, etc. The images on the signs are often intended to illustrate the products and services that the store provides; hence, owners strive to make the store's sign more lively and eye-catching. Mustapha (2009) stated two basic functions of signs in a study of shop sign language in Setif (Algeria): (1) Informative function, which included the trading name or the brand, and gave the reason for the business, aiming at identifying the business entity or business; (2) Showcase function, which aimed to make an impression, found mostly in commercial signs. The showcase function was sometimes more dominating than the information function, as commercial signs proved more an effective advertising medium diminishing the importance of its informative function.

The current research based its discussion on the classification of landscape and various functions that it was used for. The study collected a good number of sign boards from the little Japan towns identified for the study in the Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam.

## Methodology

- *Research design and locale*

This research study adopted a theoretical and practical background study approach to study the linguistic landscape theory, using the quantitative method of research. The research aimed to study the sense of permanence of interaction between Japanese culture and local Vietnamese culture through monolingual, bilingual and multilingual signboards in the Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC), the most populous and industrialized metropolis in Vietnam. This area is also the heart of Vietnam's commercial, political, academic, and

cultural life. There are a total of 16 wards in the city, which spans 2,095 square kilometers, with an estimated population of about 9 million residents as on April 1, 2019 (9.35% of Vietnam's total population). HCMC has the greatest average population density of any major Vietnamese city with 4,293 inhabitants per square kilometer.  To investigate the linguistic environment of Japanese districts in Ho Chi Minh City, the survey areas included three contiguous little Japan Town areas located in the center of Ho Chi Minh City, namely Le Thanh Ton Street-Thai Van Lung, Pham Viet Chanh Street, and Thao Dien Street.

- *Sampling*

A total of 436 images were collected from the three districts identified for the study, including signboards, notice boards, billboards, etc. The survey area of Le Thanh Ton street was the largest one, so 277 images were collected. Both these areas, populated largely by Japanese residents, are also commercially developed areas, with business, trade, and service establishments, and draws many domestic and international tourists. The development of Little Japanese Town in these areas has contributed to the characteristics and cultural diversity of Ho Chi Minh City. In the second survey area of Pham Viet Chanh Street, 42 images were sampled. This area emerged as a Japanese town in the mid-2010s, due to its location in the city center and cheaper rents, making it an attractive location for commercial activities. The  area has several restaurants serving Japanese dishes; hence, it a paradise for Japanese food lovers. It is often called the second Little Japan Town of Ho Chi Minh City. The third survey area of Thao Dien Street was once an ordinary Vietnamese town with corporate investments, but in 2015, it was transformed into a Japanese town with distinct Japanese aesthetics. The survey in this area yielded a total of 117 images. All three survey areas shared some common characteristics: They were residential or business districts of foreigners, particularly Japanese; they were bustling central roadways with a significant number of people passing through each day, and there were numerous shops and businesses in all three areas.

- *Data Collection and Procedure*

The acquired data was categorized into two primary groups: one based on the functional scope and the other on linguistic composition. The research procedure to examine the relationship between linguistic landscape and language policy, the sign system in the sampled Little Japan Towns, followed the recommendations and data sources identification guidelines of  Backhaus (2006). According to their guidelines, the data was collected from

- Shops, restaurants, eateries signboards, which advertised the brands of the establishments or business units in that area.
- Company and business signboards which represented a company, brand, introduced to customers, with specific characteristics.
- Directional signs and street names which helped the traffic on the route, with the function of identifying, guiding, signaling, and warning.
- Notes and notices signboards, such as banners and slogans posted on information boards or hung outdoors, which provided necessary information and notices from the area authorities for both locals and tourists.
- Menu cards of restaurants and bars as displayed on chalkboards, posters, paper, etc. introducing delicious food and special items.

- Outdoor advertising signs such as advertising panels, independently installed light boxes, LED billboards, etc.

The data was collected by moving along the roads in the entire survey area. The sampled images were identified and photographed with the LG G6 Android smartphone, which displayed both bilingual and multilingual signs distinctly, along with letters and symbols in the images.

- *Data analysis*

Research on linguistic landscapes should mostly be done using quantitative analysis (Lanza & Woldemariam, 2014) and image analysis (Akindele, 2011). This would help the researchers the way they "conceptualize, investigate and analyze texts, contexts and meanings" (Pérez-Milans & Tollefson, 2018), and enable them to interpret the intersecting and competing languages. In addition to following these recommendations, the paper also used the method of discourse analysis to explore how language policies affect the linguistic landscape in the surveyed areas. The signs, both bilingual and multilingual, hinted at visible and invisible discourses. The discourse analysis approach provided a useful lens for looking at the many discourses language policy, helping to reflect on the "dynamic and multi-sense nature of language in society" (Hult, 2009), and look at linguistic landscape features that are related to each individual's language choice.

This study also relied on the linguistic landscape classification system of Ben-Rafael et al. (2010), the problem approach of Backhaus (2006) and analytical methods , all of which helped to analyze and assess the characteristics of the linguistic landscape in each survey area in interaction with language policy in Vietnam. To make the analysis clear, we explored the linguistic landscape in interaction with language policy by language component (bilingual, multilingual) and by field of activity in each survey area with illustrative examples. The data analysis helped in understanding the complex relationship between the elements in linguistic landscape discourses and language policy.

## Results

- *Classification by functional scope*

Table 1 illustrates a very low number and percentage of top-down signboards surveyed in the areas (always below 7%), with the Pham Viet Chanh Street having no signboards at all. The lesser number is understandable given that the survey regions were not the headquarters of government agencies or state organizations.

**Table 1**

*Survey results of signs classified by the functional Scope*

| Surveyed Area And Total Number Of Images (100%) | Top – Down (Number Of Images – Percent) | Bottom – Up (Number Of Images – Percent) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Signs of public organizations, public signs, public notices, street name signs | Shop sign | Private business signboard | Private notice board |
| Le Thanh Ton Street - Thai Van Lung 277 images | 19 6.8% | 135 48.7% | 14 5% 93.2% | 109 39.5% |

| Surveyed Area And Total Number Of Images (100%) | Top – Down (Number Of Images – Percent) | Bottom – Up (Number Of Images – Percent) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Signs of public organizations, public signs, public notices, street name signs | Shop sign | Private business signboard | Private notice board |
| Pham Viet Chanh Street 42 images | 0 0% | 26 62% | 1 2.4% | 15 35.6% |
| | | | 100% | |
| Thao Dien Street 117 images | 5 4.3% | 72 61.5% | 4 3.4% | 36 30.8% |
| | | | 95.7% | |

Although official signs were present in the survey area, as seen in Figure 2, there was a significant difference between their number and information they displayed; yet, they still served some purposes mostly giving out notices, information, directions, etc. which the locals and tourists might need.



**Figure 2.** *Signs showing the official group at Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung street area*

On the other hand, the dominant number of bottom-up signs (always greater than 90 percent) indicates the rapid growth of the diverse business, commerce, service, etc. The survey results reveal that a majority of informal signs pertain to food and beverage industry (restaurants, eateries, pubs, bars, grocery stores, convenience stores, etc.), entertainment (bar, pub, club, etc.), cosmetology (massage and spa, hairdressing, manicure, etc.), hotel or rental, and a small number of other service sectors (tourism, laundry, etc.). Shop signs occupied a high percentage (the highest among all types of signs), and there were various notice boards including billboards, menus, price lists, instruction boards, notices, etc. (always over 30%, especially, this number almost reached 40% in the area of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung) (Table 1), reflecting the development of service businesses such as F&B, lodging, tourism, and recreation, etc. The results also indicate that there were a small number of businesses or commercial firms (5% or less).

- *Classified by number of languages*

The data collected was also classified based on number of languages showing monolingual, bilingual and multilingual usage. Table 2 presents the result of the linguistic classification of 423 images sampled for the study:

**Table 2**

*Survey results of signs classified by number of languages (N=436)*

| Surveyed area and total number of images (100%) | Monolingual signs | | Bilingual signs | | Multilingual signs | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Use only Vietnamese | Use only one language other than Vietnamese | Use Vietnamese and another language | Use two languages other than Vietnamese | Use Vietnamese and at least two other languages | Use at least three kinds of languages other than Vietnamese |
| Le Thanh Ton Street - Thai Van Lung 277 images | 21 | 97 | 17 | 115 | 25 | 2 |
| | 7.6% | 35% | 6.2% | 41.5% | 9% | 0.7% |
| Pham Viet Chanh Street 42 images | 7 | 15 | 4 | 10 | 6 | 0 |
| | 16.6% | 35.7% | 9.5% | 23.9% | 14.3% | 0% |
| Thao Dien Street 117 images | 10 | 68 | 29 | 9 | 1 | 0 |
| | 8.6% | 58% | 24.8% | 7.8% | 0.8% | 0% |

Based on the language(s) used, the signs found in the sampled districts were classified into three categories: monolingual, bilingual and multilingual signs.

*a) Monolingual signs*

The monolingual signs meant signs which were only in English, Vietnmese and Japanese languages. The survey results revealed that there were English-only signs in nearly all sign categories and were especially common for shop signs and private notice boards. The Vietnamese monolingual signs were mostly on the signboard of the shops or the billboards advertising traditional Vietnamese products. In both Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung and Pham Viet Chanh streets, the Japanese language also appeared prominently, reflecting the focus on Japanese audiences. Japanese monolingual signs were mostly private advertising signs and shop signs. Figure 3 presents the statsitical results of monolingual signs; while Figure 4 exemplifies these signs.
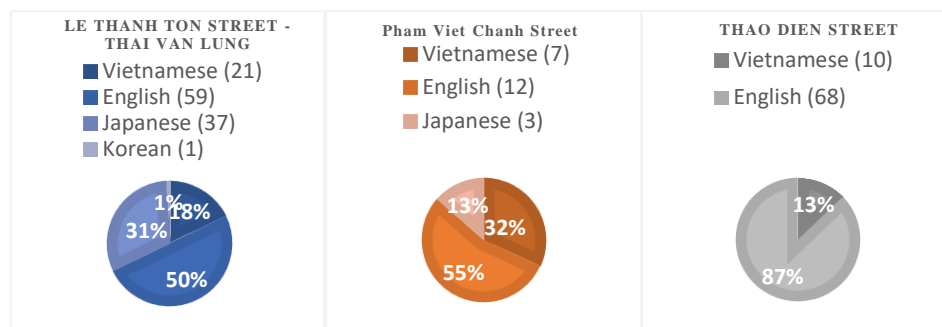


**Figure 3.** *Statistical results of monolingual signs*

**Figure 4:** *Examples of monoligual signs*

*b)  Bilingual sign*

According to the survey, bilingual signs featuring in English and Japanese account for the highest proportion in the two areas of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung and Pham Viet Chanh street, indicating the preference for overseas audiences. A large number of bilingual signs can be found and most of them were shop name signs, business names, notice signs, advertisements, instructions, etc. Most of these signs were for businesses like restaurants, bars, spas, shopping stores, etc.

Particularly in the area of Thao Dien Street, the portion of English-Japanese bilingual signs was second place, after Vietnamssese-English bilingualism. The number of bilingual signs in English - Vietnamese was modest and conconsistedstly of notice boards, advertisements, menus, etc, of eateries. Figure 5 presents the statsitical results of bilingual signs; while Figure 6 exemplifies these signs in the sampled districts.
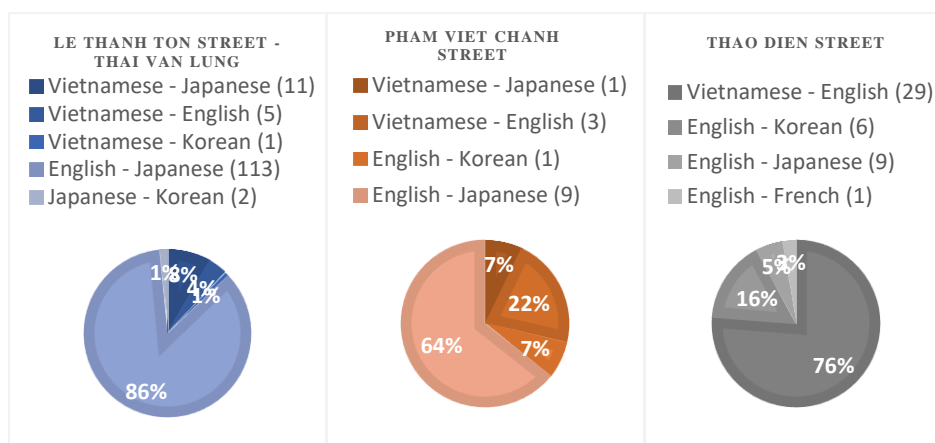


**Figure 5.** *Statistical results of bilingual signs*

**Figure 6.** *Bilingual signs in English - Japanese and English Vietnamese*

c) *Multilingual signs*

Multilingual signs appeared in small numbers in all three survey areas. Most multilingual signs were notice signs (notices, advertisements, menus, instructions). The services that used multilingual signs were restaurants, spas store, rental houses, etc. Figure 7 presents the statsitical results of multi-lingual signs; while Figure 8 exemplifies these signs in the sampled districts.
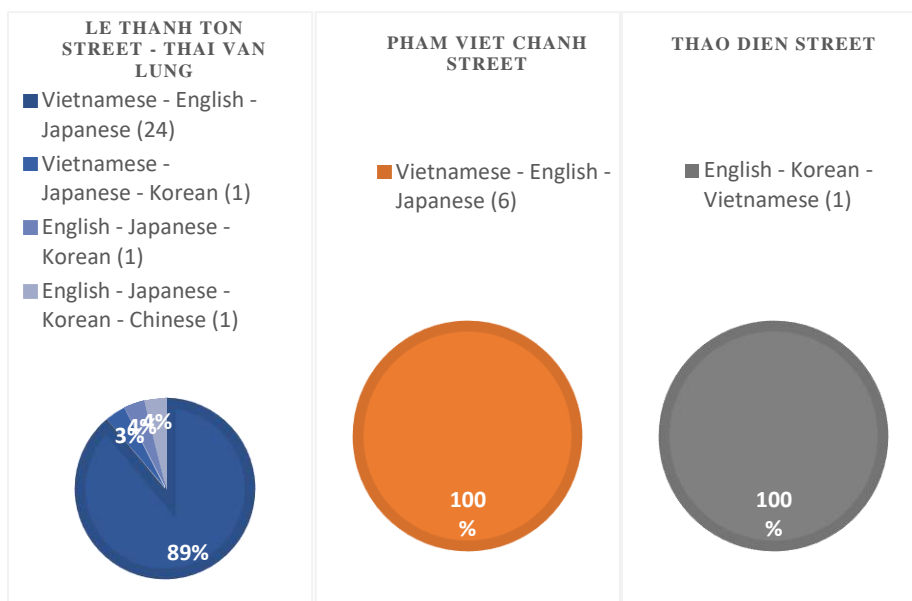


**Figure 7.** *Statistical results of multilingual signs*

**Figure 8.** *Multilingual signs in English - Japanese - Vietnamese in the areas of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung street (left) and Pham Viet Chanh street (right)*

- *Frequency of appearance of languages on signs*

The next step in the survey was to find out the frequency of the appearance of languages, both Vietnamese and foreign languages, which included, English, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and French. Table 4 presents the status of the frequency of language appearing on signs, as yielded from the data collected.

**Table 4**

*Statistical results of the frequency of language appearing on signs*

| Surveyed area and the total number of images (100%) | Vietnamese | English | Japanese | Korean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Le Thanh Ton Street - Thai Van Lung | 63/277 | 203/277 | 190/277 | 7/277 |
| 277 images | 22.7% | 73.3% | 68.6% | 2.5% |
| Pham Viet Chanh Street | 17/42 | 31/42 | 19/42 | 1/42 |
| 42 images | 40.5% | 73.8% | 45.2% | 2.4% |
| Thao Dien Street | 40/117 | 107/117 | 2/117 | 9/117 |
| 117 images | 34.2% | 91.5% | 1.7% | 7.7% |

The data shows that foreign languages were heavily represented on the signs found in the sampled areas. Though Vietnamese is the official national language used in state government documents and materials intended for Vietnamese speakers, and Vietnamese monolingual signs also account for the majority of the signs, still Vietnamese signs were much less than the number of signs in foreign languages. The most common language on monolingual signs in all three survey areas was English, the most common languages on bilingual signs were English - Japanese or English - Vietnamese, and multilingual signs always had English as one of the languages, which suggests that there were efforts being made to accommodate foreigners, mainly tourists. In the two areas of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung and Pham Viet Chanh street, the second most popular language was Japanese.

English is the lingua franca globally, also being the safest language for targeting foreign guests, since not only British or American people but most other foreigners can understand the English language. Moreover, locals in these places can also understand English, making the highest frequency of English usage comprehensible. Japanese is the second most spoken language in the Pham Viet Chanh and Thai Van Lung sections of Le Thanh Ton, right after English. This is owing to a large percentage of Japanese people in the population in addition to the Japanese tourists. Among other foreign language appearing in the three survey areas, Korean, Chinese, and French had a very low occurrence rate, only about 2.5% in the area of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung and Pham Viet Chanh street, and 7.7% on Thao Dien street. Figure 9 presents a few signs using Korean in the area of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung street and Thao Dien street.



**Figure 9.** *Signs using Korean in the area of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung street (left image) and Thao Dien street (two images on the right)*

The survey area on Pham Viet Chanh Street has a higher frequency of occurrence of Vietnamese than the other two areas, perhaps because this region is mostly populated by Vietnamese and has fewer foreigners compared to the other two areas. Since the Thao Dien street survey area is a newly developed area, focusing on business and tourism services catering to foreigners, English is the most popular language of choice. However, unlike the other two areas, the Japanese were only represented on a tiny fraction of signs (only 2 signs, accounting for 1.7%). It's evidence of a general disinterest in Japanese in this area. Even the signs for Japanese-themed eateries and retailers were also written entirely in English.

- *Classification based on Linguistic components of the sign structure*

The survey results were also classified based on the linguistic components of the sign structure. These signs usually comprised of following four components:

1. Type of service (type of operation, type of business).
2. Name or brand (name of the store, information about the brand representing that business).
3. Content of the sign (the detailed information about the product or service that the store provides).
4. Contact information (address information, how to contact).

Table 5 presents the statistical results of the frequency of occurrence of languages (English, Japanese, Vietnamese) at specific locations on signboards

**Table 5**

*Frequency  of languages at specific locations on signboards*

| Surveyed area and total number of images (N=436) | Language | Type of Service | Name or Brand | Content of the sign | Contact information |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Le Thanh Ton Street - Thai Van Lung 277 images | English | 65 50.4% | 105 81.4% | 27 21% | 16 12.4% |
| | Japanese | 41 31.8% | 59 45.7% | 25 19.4% | 0 0% |
| | Vietnamese | 11 8.5% | 2 1.6% | 10 7.8% | 21 16.3% |
| Pham Viet Chanh Street 42 images | English | 10 37% | 19 70.4% | 6 22.2% | 0 0% |
| | Japanese | 2 7.4% | 5 18.5% | 5 18.5% | 0 0% |
| | Vietnamese | 3 11.1% | 4 14.8% | 3 11.1% | 9 3.3% |
| Thao Dien Street 76 images | English | 22 29% | 65 85.5% | 15 19.7% | 5 6.6% |
| | Japanese | 0 0% | 2 2.6% | 0 0% | 0 0% |
| | Vietnamese | 2 2.6% | 10 13.2% | 6 7.9% | 13 7.1% |

The data yielded from all three survey areas, in all linguistic components, reveals a higher frequency of English, as compared to other languages (e.g., Japanese and Vietnamese). The statistics (Table 5) reflects the prevalence of English in the linguistic landscapes at all surveyed locations. For the two areas of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung and Pham Viet Chanh street, although known as the old Japanese Towns, the percentage of Japanese signs was still somewhat lower than that of English or had English phonetic transcription. In particular, Thao Dien Street area, the newest Japanese Town, the stores preferred English names, even if they sold products related to Japan, Korea, or Vietnam. Most of the business names were written in English (as shown in Figure 10) However, in the two long-established Japanese Towns on Le Thanh Ton's Thai Van Lung and Pham Viet Chanh street areas, Japanese signs appear quite a lot, but often with an English phonetic transcription right on the shop signs (Figure 11).

**Figure 10.** *Signs use English in the information section of the service type and the name*



**Figure 11.** *Signs using Japanese names and English translations*

A number of signs that provided service type information were written in either English (Figure 12) or a combination of other two languages. A few signboards were written in Japanese (less common than English) (Figure 13) in the two areas of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung and Pham Viet Chanh street. However, for contact information, Vietnamese was mostly preferred (Figure 14). Understandably, the contact information, which was the store address in most cases, was important information that marked the location of the store. It was also noticed that most store owners would not put their contact information on their main signboard, if they had many branches or offices.



**Figure 12.** *Signs with service type information in English*

**Figure 13.** *Signs with service type information in Japanese*



**Figure 14.** *Signs with contact information in Vietnamese*

- *Features of the Japanese cuisine in the surveyed areas*

The linguistic landscape also comprises the cultural features, the prominent of which is the cuisine, food and beverages. The signboards sampled from the three surveyed areas also yielded the culinary Japanese culture in these Little Japan Towns, as found in the signboards of restaurants, eateries, pubs, and food trading. The survey revealed 52 food service shops out of 135 stores in Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung street, accounting for nearly 40%, which dealt with the Japanese cuisine. The reason is that this this area attracts the locals, as well as tourists, as it serves homegrown food to Japanese people who live far from home. Likewise, there were 17 food service shops out of 26 stores in Pham Viet Chanh Street, accounting for more than 65%. In this area too, the Japanese cuisine was prevalent, but closer to the taste of the locals. This contributes to developing this town to become an area specializing in serving Japanese dishes loved by Vietnamese people.

To attract more local visitors, the rate of using the Vietnamese language in this area is also higher than in the other two areas. The Thao Dien Street area has developed a variety of business services: food and drink, rental houses, aesthetics, fashions, entertainments, travels, interior products, etc. This area developed the service business not a long time ago, hence it is not particularly outstanding for any specific type of service, but the highest percentage, in this area too, is that of the food business, though there are 11 stores out of 73 (accounting for more than 15%).

Sushi and Sashimi are two most prominent traditional Japanese dishes, with a harmonious combination, served by nearly all Japanese restaurants. From the sampled images, 35 out of 129 images in the Japanese Town of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung streets; 8 out of 27 images in the Town of Pham Viet Chanh Street; and 7 out of 76 images in the Town of Thao Dien Street served Sushi and Sashimi. With the proportion of nearly 30% in the two areas of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung and Pham Viet Chanh streets, 10% in the Town of Thao Dien, Sushi - Sashimi has become an outstanding culinary cultural feature, close to Japanese culture and Japanese people.

In terms of language, because it is called the national food of Japan, Sushi-Sashimi restaurants are mostly designed in the most possible traditional way and prioritized by the Japanese language. In some stores, Japanese may not be the preferred language to write on the top of signs or menus, but it still occupies an important position and has a high frequency on menu boards or signs with advertising information. Figure 15 exemplifies signboards and information boards of Sushi shops in the surveyed areas.



F**igure 15.** *Signboards and information boards of Sushi shops in the surveyed areas*

Noodles are another very popular Japanese dish when dining out, the most popular types of Japanese noodles included Udon, Ramen, Soba, and Somen. In particular, Ramen is the most popular noodle type in Japan, with more than 30,000 Ramen noodle shops across Japan. Noodles' popularity has greatly affected the life and culture in Vietnam, specifically Ramen and Udon brands, which often appear in manga and anime. There were 11 out of 129 images that specialized in Japanese noodles (Ramen, Udon, Soba) in the area of Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung, while there were 5 out of 27 images that showed Japanese noodle shops in in the Town of Pham Viet Chanh Street. The number of Japanese noodle shops many not be too many, but they are widespread and their recognition is quite high. These stores are also prioritized by outstanding visual designs, using English and Vietnamese with many illustrations for the promoting purpose, explaining more about the type of noodles that the shop is selling. In particular, using the name of the type of noodle, the shops transacted their business, as seen in Figure 16.

**Figure 16.** *Signboards and information boards of the Ramen shops in the surveyed areas*

Among the beverages, Sake is considered "Japan's national drink" since ancient times. It is customary to offer Sake to gods before consuming it with a meal.  Made from rice and water, Sake has a special traditional cultural meaning, symbolizing the bridge between humans and gods. The traditional culture of Sake also follows the traditional Japanese dishes that are popular around the world. In the surveyed areas, the word "Sake" can be seen on the signs and menus of Japanese restaurants, and sometimes it is easy to see the food shops selling this alcohol (See Figure 17).



**Figure 17.** *Signboards of Sake shops in the survey areas*

Sake has also changed the trend of alcohol consumption in Japan in a more practical direction. In an after-work drinking activity called Nomination, a portmanteau formed from two words, Nomination (Nomikai in Japanese meaning wine party) and Communication in English. The above compound word refers to the mandatory meals between bosses and employees in a company after work. However, the culture of "nomination" has opposite opinions, but it still thrives, becoming a new cultural feature in Japanese Towns. In the surveyed areas, there were 47 bars and pubs out of the total 129 images (36%) in the Le Thanh Ton - Thai Van Lung area, and 5 out of 27 images (18%) in the Pham Viet Chanh area. With a relatively high frequency, it shows the influence of "nomination" and "drinking and playing" in the towns.

In all pub signs, a frequency of the use of English was noticed in all surveyed areas. Most of the titles of shops were set in English, and the business type of the shop was represented by the word "Bar" which is often written in English. However, two Japanese phrases with high frequency on the signs were noticved, "カウンターバー" (Counter Bar)

and "カラオケ" (Karaoke), as seen in Figure 18.



**Figure 18.** *Bar Signs in the surveyed areas*

- *Launching products at façade of stores*

The facade of a store in Japan often appears with detailed signboards about the products that they are trading. These facades show information such as product images, menus, price lists, and product ingredients.  In the surveyed areas, it was easy to find product menus at these facades. Such menus depicted product information (e.g., images, details, prices, etc.), in bilingual or multilingual forms, as suitable for diverse customers. Most stores used facades to directly promote their products to customers, which was both cost-effective and simple (See Figure 19).



**Figure 19.** *Menus placed at the facade of stores*

In most big restaurants and high-price stores, along with the menus, the glass cabinets contained product samples displayed on the store facade. It was a kind of promotion of the product, but it was very rare due to high cost, and the sample cabinets occupied a lot of space, which can obscure the store. However, the advantage of this promotion was to attract customers and provide them a more specific and realistic view of the products. In

terms of language, when the store used the sample itself, there was no need for a verbal introduction of the product (Figure 20).



**Figure 20**. *Product samples placed in the facade of a store*

Similar to this feature, there is also a trend, in low price restaurants, to call and invite customers into the cafes and restaurants. The staff would often stand at the entrance to greet the customers, introduce the menu, and distribute information leaflets about the store. This type of personal advertising is typical in shopping streets in Japan and in many parts of the world, but to some extent, it is not practical in a local culture, and difficult to apply in Vietnam. The reason is that guests and customers communicate in different languages, and it is difficult for the staff to decide which language to use to attract guests. In addition, if these restaurants are located in residential areas, loudly inviting guests was a violation of the law and might raise issue of security and order. However, in most Vietnamese restaurants, this type of promotion still happened implicitly and to a softer extent. The store staff would usually stand inside the entrance, greet each customers by first opening the door and then share more information about products with customers. The language used was still impressive as it created a good impression on customers and kept them gentle, but not manipulative. This type of advertising was also commonly used for promoting menus at restaurants and shops serving massage and spa services.

## Discussion

Of the three Japanese neighborhoods surveyed, Little Japan Town (a part of Le Thanh Ton and Thai Van Lung street, Ben Nghe ward was the oldest and most popular area. This was also the area with the appearance of most top-down signs. Although there were only 19 signs, accounting for 6.8%, these signs were from the state, belonging to the official language landscape, so they had distinct characteristics and effects. The official signs in this area provided official information, transparent, objective, standardized, consistent, and easy-to-understand. Since these official signs were in Japanese neighborhoods, the information was mainly for guidance and disseminating regulations and announcements, most of which were presented in all three languages (Vietnamese, English, and Japanese). The multilingual factor in official signs shows the multicultural and multi-ethnic

characteristics in a linguistic landscape of the Little Japanese Town. However, the language used first on these signs was still Vietnamese, confirming its role as the national language of Vietnam.

Statistics on bottom-up signs in the linguistic landscapes of these regions showed that foreign languages accounted for a very large proportion. Especially, Japanese showed a frequency of 190 (68.6%) out of 277 images. This ratio was the result of economic development, which was greatly influenced by the demographic characteristics of customers. The customers comprised a Japanese population of about 300 Japanese households, the second densest frequency in this area. Since Japanese was not a common language of the Vietnamese people, the stores also added English, a global language, to communicate more easily with local people and tourists from other countries. English became the language with the highest frequency at 203/277 (73.3%). The main role of English in this area was to bridge communication between stores and multi-ethnic customers.

The bottom-up signs also mostly belonged to F&B businesses (e.g., restaurants, eateries, grocery stores, convenience stores, etc.), and entertainment businesses (bars, pubs, etc.). The survey yielded that the language appearing with the highest frequency was English (31/42, accounting for 73.8%), and the second was Japanese (19/42, accounting for 45.2%). However, the majority of signs were monolingual in English or bilingual-multilingual with English as one of the languages, which proves that English was the preferred language in this area.

Notably, the shops did not form a separate commercial and business area but were blended with residential houses. In order to attract Vietnamese customers in the vicinity, the businesses offered Japanese-style services but with cross-cultural features, tailored for Vietnamese people (for example, the Vietnamese language on signs, services, and facades did not strictly conform to the Japanese tradition). Perhaps these were the reasons why in the area of Japan Street on Pham Viet Chanh Street, Vietnamese still accounted for a relatively good proportion, 17/42 (40.5%). In general, perhaps because it wanted to attract more locals as well as tourists, most of the signs in the sampled areas used both English and Japanese. The store signs still featured images or decorations unique to Japanese traditions to attract customers.

One feature of Thao Dien street was very prominent. Since it was a new city, its areas were still in the stage of change and development. Little Japanese Town at 28 Thao Dien Street, had a newly built complex, opened in mid-2018, with the name "Oishi town Japanese town". Because it was a newly formed Japanese Town and was originally formed by business investment, the linguistic landscape of this area also developed in a different direction from the other two survey areas. In addition, the section of Thao Dien street outside the Japanese quarter also developed in a more liberal direction, mainly using English to serve its main customers, the foreigners. Due to its location near the center and commercial and residential areas with a large number of foreigners, English surpassed other languages in popularity with a very high frequency of occurrence of 107/117 (91.5%). In addition to English, Korean, Japanese, French, etc. were also used. These foreign languages were almost equal in the frequency of occurrence (always less than 8%). Vietnamese in this area also accounted for a relatively high rate of 40/117 (34.2%). Most of

the signs in Vietnamese were top-down signs. Bottom-up signs using Vietnamese in this area mostly noticed boards, instruction boards, or signboards of eateries (selling Vietnamese food such as Banh Mi, Pho, and like).

The target customers were mainly foreigners in Thao Dien street, which also affected the types of services in this area. Most of the shops here offered food, entertainment, travel, accommodation, etc. services featuring Japanese culture. Notably, the frequency of English appearing in the language landscape was very high, reflecting the internationalization of the businesses. It can also be said that the Thao Dien Street area aimed for internationalization and to become a more "Western" neighborhood in the future. Its frequency of English appeared was the highest (91.5%), while in the other two regions, it was about 73%. The Little Japanese Town on Pham Viet Chanh Street started its development in about 2015 and was located within a medium-sized residential area with a modest number of foreign residents. Therefore, the linguistic landscape in this neighborhood was also different from the other two survey areas. This area was a short street, and the Little Japanese Town was developed spontaneously, so there was no sign of official signs.

- *Application of linguistic landscape in foreign language teaching*

The current study findings are applicable in practical situations such as teaching Japanese in Vietnamese educational institutions, where learners' comprehensibility is often not too high due to very low exposure of the Japanese language in books and classroom teaching. The knowledge that students acquire from books is often rigid, theoretical, and unnatural in communication. The current study on the linguistic landscape, especially the multilingual system, therefore, would provide useful insights. It could be a rich source of reference materials in the education field and teaching and learning foreign languages.

In teaching and learning, it is easy to get confused in complicated long-term interpretations in the native language. Moreover, teachers do not often link knowledge with practical usage and examples. If teachers impart knowledge in a third language, learners will associate quickly and understand the problem more easily. In a multilingual environment such as of the survey areas, a certain object or problem is expressed in many languages in a way that is most suitable, understandable, and natural for native speakers. Therefore, in the learners' position, understanding languages in these areas also means that learners can be fluent and have basic authentic knowledge of that language.

Observing the current situation of languages in the surveyed areas, it is also easy to find the language interference between Japanese and English. Many words are not in Japanese (no pure Japanese words) so people use English (becoming a foreign word, borrowed word) to replace this language. There are also many words in Japanese (pure Japanese) that are considered old (ancient) words, so they should be replaced by English synonyms. Teachers need to observe, grasp these linguistic features promptly and perceive the typical signs to supplement their knowledge and convey it to learners effectively.

The main goal of learning a foreign language, after all, is to apply that foreign language in social and economic matters. The appropriate foreign language teaching method in today's multilingual environment is teaching by interaction with realistic external environments. Students no longer have to sit and passively absorb knowledge from

teachers, but they need to interact with teachers, apply theories to practical situations; and importantly, interact with the real environment outside. By understanding a foreign language, teachers can design and organize lessons more realistically and develop students' capacity. Teachers need to apply traditional and modern teaching methods flexibly and introduce practical information in lectures so that students can find the real value of learning the language. Thereby, knowledge becomes closer and more useful. Outside the classroom, teachers can also organize extra activities for students to experience or assign practical activities. The more opportunities teachers create for their students to learn about real life outside, the greater applications students can apply the theories they have learned into practice.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this study found out that signboards in all three survey areas had foreign languages with a high frequency of English and Japanese, or are bilingual – multilingual, with English as one of the languages. The data reflects that the areas in the survey were quite special in terms of language use, as well as economic and commercial development. Moreover, in the current context of internationalization and international integration, the use of foreign languages was almost inevitable. In neighborhoods with foreign influences like this, it is quite common for signs in this area to use only foreign languages.

After investigating a total of 436 images of signs in the survey areas and analyzing them in two directions: functional scope classification and linguistic components classification, the statistical results showed that there were many disparities and differences among the survey areas. It was evident that the linguistic landscapes were diverse in each of the small areas and contributed to creating a picture of the common linguistic landscape in Ho Chi Minh City. There were many inconsistencies, as well; however, the statistics reflected the reality of socio-cultural and economic development in Ho Chi Minh City. All the three survey areas were seen promoting economic development, internationalization, globalization, etc. English and Japanese were prioritized in usage, which also proves that these foreign languages are being favored and used widely. English enjoyed the highest priority and attracted multinational customers to visit and use the services and facilities at stores doing businesses. For practical purposes, it is clear to confirm that English is a language with many opportunities for development in education and employment.

On the one hand, developing foreign languages and using them densely, especially English in all three survey areas, and Japanese in two of them, enriches the linguistic landscape and creates a typical cultural imprint for the linguistic landscape in the region. On the other hand, this is also a sign of the lost sense of preserving national cultural values. The specific linguistic landscape in this study showed the typical cultural imprints existing in the area, showing the cultural interference, especially the Japanese - Vietnamese culture. The characteristics of Japanese culture in these areas are mainly reflected in the food culture. The method of promoting "Japanese-style" products also has interference changes due to the impact of the "Vietnamese-style" environment. This particular linguistic landscape

is the most practical reference medium for foreign language teachers and learners. The multilingual landscape is a measure for comparing and contrasting the languages with each other, helping learners to achieve a more objective and comprehensive view of the type of language they are learning.

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