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# An Exploratory Survey of the Linguistic Landscape of Lake Toya

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# 洞爺湖における言語景観の探索調査

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**Abstract**： The objective of this study is to examine the state of foreign language signage in a local Hokkaido community through conducting a linguistic landscape survey of the area. This was done to explore the utility of linguistic landscape surveys as a means for evaluating and improving upon foreign language signage and to promote positive visitor experiences and tourism in local areas in Hokkaido. This exploratory survey was conducted in the Lake Toya resort area in the Iburi region of Hokkaido. Its results were based on a corpus of 418 public signs recorded in the survey area in October, 2017. The results indicated bifurcated top-down and bottom-up trends in public space language use with an overall dominance of monolingual signage and a varied state in multilingual signage. The utility, sufficiency, and suitability of the signage in this area are discussed as are future avenues for developing public spaces conducive to promoting positive tourist experiences in local Hokkaido areas.

**Key words**：linguistic landscape, tourism, Hokkaido, survey

## 1. Introduction

### 1. 1 Japan's Expanding Tourism Sector

With declining populations and concomitant strains on local economic growth, social programs, and human resources (Berke, 2018), Japanese national and local governments have turned to tourism as a potential driver for economic growth (Mori, 2018; Nikkei, 2018). This trend is particularly visible in Japan's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transportation and Tourism's (MLIT) "New Growth Strategy" for national and regional development and revitalization. Within this plan, originally proposed in 2010, the ministry established the preliminary goal of achieving 25 million annual visitors by 2020, and 30 million in subsequent years with the Foreign Visitor 30 Million Program. The document described the overarching goal of establishing Japan as a tourist nation, with tourism targeted as a specific means for regional revitalization.

Specifics of the plan were more fully developed in the Visit Japan Program initiative (MLIT 2016) which aimed at promoting Japan as a tourist destination both domestically and

overseas including promotional efforts through overseas tourist bureaus. Within this plan, The Reception and Environment Improvement Program focused on developing the domestic environment to improve tourist mobility in given regions within Japan. This program was comprised of a three-tiered plan focused on improving the reception environment and promoting revisits through elevating tourists' degree of satisfaction with their stays, the development of locally-based hospitality in the target areas, improvement of the tourist environment on a nation-wide basis, and the introduction of self-assessment of the tourism environment. Within this scheme was the establishment of strategic and regional centers which represented areas of high tourist traffic, and areas expected to have more visitors, respectively. Promotional activities and programs, guidebooks, web pages, maps, and road signs were also identified as being essential elements in the plan.

These activities, combined with a variety of favorable trends including growing affluence in, and increasing tourist numbers from, neighboring Asian countries, and favorable exchange rates (see Smith, 2018), have contributed to Japan already exceeding the 2020 visitor number goal in 2017 (28,691,073), and being currently on pace to exceed this number yet again in 2018 (JTNO 2018; JTB 2018; Yamazaki & Shigeta, 2018).

### 1.2 The Linguistic Landscape

The concept of linguistic landscape came to prominence with a seminal paper by Landry and Bouris (1997), who described it as "the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (p. 23, 1997). They explained that "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combine to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration" (p.25). This paper outlined important informational and symbolic functions of signage. Informational functions included linguistic group territories and boundaries, the utility of particular languages in specific areas, the sociological composition and power paradigms between language groups, and the degree of multilingualism in a particular area. Symbolic functions included the relative value and status of languages, objective and subjective ethnolinguistic vitality of languages, and the relative strength of competing languages.

Current studies concerning the linguistic landscape have demonstrated it to be a multi-faceted phenomenon suitably examined from a range of theoretical perspectives (see Gorter, 2013, Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). Recent studies into the linguistic landscape in Asia demonstrate the expanding arch of research in this area in terms of focus, methods and approach.

In a study of the linguistic landscape of Tokyo, Backhaus (2006) surveyed 28 areas of the metropolis and examined a sample of 11,838 signs. He observed essential differences between official and non-official signs, with official signs being found to have design features reinforcing

and expressing existing power relations, and non-official signs using foreign languages to communicate solidarity with “things non-Japanese”. In a Korea-based study, Lawrence (2012) explored the characteristics of the Korean English linguistic landscape using sociolinguistic modeling. Measuring public signage in seven sample areas in Seoul’s major areas, as well as other cities across Korea, it was demonstrated that social stratification and cascade models were moderately supported, with English being associated with modernity, luxury, and youth. In another Asian-based study, Kerry (2012) set out to show how language choice indexes social and national identity in the linguistic landscape of Dili, Timor-Leste. A sample of 40 official and 113 non-official signs were examined in terms of indexicality, iconicity, and visual grammar. With sample languages including Portuguese, Tetum, Indonesian, and English, it was demonstrated that competing communities and histories produced a complex multilingual reality in which developing equitable linguistic landscape policy is as vital as it is difficult. In a study with yet another distinct focus, Mee (2013) sought to examine the state of the post-reversion Hong-Kong linguistic landscape. Examining signage in the area 12 years after reversion, a sample of 1,160 signs demonstrated high English and Chinese profiles, but with Chinese growing more dominant. PRC influence on signage was also observed with Chinese becoming more simplified. Representation of minority languages was minimal, with what minority language samples ascertained not necessarily suggesting minority language groups, but rather being a reflection of culinary or fashion trends in signage for businesses such as Japanese restaurants. In an examination of the mainland China city of Suzhou, Songqing (2015) sought to assess the presence of and uses of English through assessing the linguistic traits of signage. The study demonstrated that though inventive portmanteaus, transgressive Romanization, bilingual paronomasia, and exocentric compounding, the English in Suzhou was deconstructed and reconstructed in a manner that made it a unique product of its own linguistic landscape. In yet another distinct methodological approach, Rowland (2016) examined the linguistic landscape in Japan in terms of motive analysis using tertiary Japanese student perceptions of multilingual signage. The findings indicated three major types of motivations, commercial, cultural essentialism, and globalization which projected materialistic/idealist world views. This qualitative approach and account represents new methodological directions in assessing societal multilingualism.

### 1.3 Objective

The studies above demonstrate the wide range of foci and approaches, as well as a number of distinct sociolinguistic perspectives gleaned from, examining the linguistic landscape in Asia. Drawing on its demonstrated utility and broad applicability, this study endeavored to explore the linguistic landscape in reference to tourism in local areas. More specifically, it set out to examine if linguistic landscape surveys can provide insights into the sufficiency and

suitability of tourist signage in local areas in Hokkaido. The target area of this study was the popular spa area of Lake Toya, in the Iburi region of Hokkaido. Located in the Shikotsuko-Toya National Park, Lake Toya is well-known as the location of the 2008 G-8 Summit. This area was chosen as its local economy is inexorably tied to tourism, and in recent years has targeted overseas tourism to make up for decreasing domestic tourism numbers (Muroran Shinpo, 2016). It is hoped this survey can not only illustrate the state of the area's linguistic landscape, but also provide direction to local stakeholders in developing tourist-friendly public spaces in the area.

## 2. Methods

Data collected in this study was taken from a sample area between Kohan Dori and Route 2 in Lake Toya, an area comprising the main lakeside, resort, and boardwalk areas of Lake Toya's spa area. A total of 418 sign samples were collected. Content analysis of each sign was conducted to assess the language content, degree of language dominance, origin, materiality, and purpose. Notes were also taken to record any other particular distinct graphic or semiotic features noted in specific signs.

## 3. Results

Results of the survey indicated that of the 418 icons observed, 250, or 59.8 percent of the signs were monolingual (see Table 1). Of the monolingual signs, 80 percent (N=200) were Japanese, 19.6 percent (N=49) were monolingual English, and 0.4 percent (N=1) was monolingual Korean.

Multilingual signs comprised 40.1 percent (N=168) of the sample (see Table 2). The most frequently observed language on multilingual signs was English, appearing in 98.8 percent, or 166 out of 168 multilingual signs. This was closely followed by Japanese, which appeared in 165 of the multilingual signs representing 98.2 percent of the sample. Other languages appearing on multilingual signs included Chinese on 20.2 percent (N=34), Korean on 8.9 percent (N=15), and French on 2.3 percent (N=4).

Language dominance of multilingual signs was measured by percentage of signage area coverage taken up by specific languages. Where a particular language covered a higher percentage of signage than another, or other, language(s), it was classified as dominant (see Table 3). Of the 168 multilingual signs observed, Japanese was dominant in 122, or 66.6 percent of the samples. Other dominant languages in multilingual signs included English at 9.5 percent (N=16), Chinese at 1.7 percent (N=3), and French at 0.59 percent (N=1). Shared dominance occurred where two or more languages shared an equally dominant coverage of a sign (see Table 4). English and Japanese shared dominance in 12.5 percent (N=21) of multilingual signs, while Japanese, Korean, Chinese and French shared dominance in a small percentage of the sample.

Sample signs were also examined according to their relative top-down, or bottom-up,

orientations (Table 5). Top-down signs were those that were official or governmental in nature. Bottom-up signs were those originating from private sources including businesses, NGOs, or community groups. Of the 418 samples collected, 116 were classified as top-down signage. Of the 116 top-down signs 64 (55.1 percent) were monolingual (Table 5), of which 84.3 percent (N=54) were Japanese, 12.5 percent (N=8) were English, and 1.56 percent (N=1) was Korean. Multilingual signs comprised 43.9 percent (N=51) of the top-down sample, with Japanese appearing in 100 percent (n=51), English in 98 percent (N=50), Chinese in 11.7 percent (N=6), and Korean in 7.8 percent (N=4) of these signs.

The most prevalent individual dominant languages in multilingual top-down signage were Japanese with 68.6 percent (n=35), and English at 3 percent (N=5.8) (see Table 6). Shared dominance in the top-down multilingual sample included Japanese/English at 21.5 percent (N=11), and Japanese/English/Korean and Japanese/Chinese/Korean at 1.9 percent (N=1) each.

Bottom-up signage comprised 72 percent (N=302) of the sample (Table 7). Monolingual bottom-up signs were dominated by Japanese (75 percent, N=141) and English (47 percent, N=47), and comprised 62.2 percent (N=188) of the bottom up sample. Multilingual signs made up 40.39 percent (N=122) of the bottom-up sample. Languages appearing in bottom-up multilingual signs included English (97.5 percent, N=119), Japanese (95 percent, N=116), Chinese (21.3 percent, N=26), Korean (8.1 percent, N=10), and French (3.2 percent, N=4).

Of the 122 bottom-up multilingual signs, Japanese (68 percent, N=83), English (14.7 percent, N=18), Chinese (2.45 percent, N=3) and French (0.8 percent, N=1) appeared as dominant individual languages, while Japanese/English (10.6 percent, N=13), English/Chinese (0.8 percent, N=1), Japanese/French (0.8 percent, N=1), Japanese/English/Chinese (0.8 percent, N=1), and Japanese/Chinese/English/Korean (0.8 percent, N=1) shared dominance (Table 8).

Table 1: Monolingual signage orientation

| Language | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Japanese | 200 | 80 |
| English | 49 | 19.6 |
| Korean: | 1 | 0.4 |

Table 2: Multilingual signage languages

| Language | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| English | 166 | 98.8 |
| Japanese | 165 | 98.2 |
| Chinese | 34 | 20.2 |
| Korean | 15 | 8.9 |
| French: | 4 | 2.3 |

Table 3: Multilingual: Dominant language

| Language | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Japanese | 112 | 66.6 |
| English | 16 | 9.5 |
| Chinese | 3 | 1.7 |
| French | 1 | 0.59 |

Table 4: Multilingual: Shared dominance

| Languages | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Japanese / English | 21 | 12.5 |
| Japanese/Korean | 1 | 0.59 |
| Chinese /French | 1 | 0.59 |
| Japanese/English/Korean | 1 | 0.59 |
| Japanese/English/Chinese | 1 | 0.59 |

Table 5: Signage orientation

| Top-down monolingual | N | % | Top-down multilingual | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Japanese | 54 | 84.3 | Japanese | 51 | 100 |
| English | 8 | 12.5 | English | 50 | 98 |
| Korean | 1 | 1.56 | Chinese | 6 | 11.7 |
| | | | Korean | 4 | 7.8 |

Table 6: Top-down multilingual dominant language(s)

| Languages | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Japanese | 35 | 68.6 |
| *Japanese/English | 11 | 21.5 |
| English | 3 | 5.8 |
| *Japanese/English/Korean | 1 | 1.9 |
| *Japanese/Chinese/Korean | 1 | 1.9 |

*shared dominance

Table 7: Language orientation: Bottom-up non official signage

| Bottom-up monolingual | N | % | Bottom-up multilingual | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Japanese | 141 | 75 | English | 119 | 97.5 |
| English | 47 | 25 | Japanese | 116 | 95 |
| | | | Chinese | 26 | 21.3 |
| | | | Korean | 10 | 8.1 |
| | | | French | 4 | 3.2 |

Table 8: Bottom-up multilingual dominant language(s) 122

| Languages | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Japanese | 83 | 68 |
| English | 18 | 14.7 |
| *Japanese/English | 13 | 10.6 |
| Chinese | 3 | 2.45 |
| French | 1 | 0.8 |
| *English/Chinese | 1 | 0.8 |
| *Japanese/French | 1 | 0.8 |
| *Japanese/English/Chinese | 1 | 0.8 |
| *Japanese/Chinese/English/Korean | 1 | 0.8 |

*shared dominance

**4. Discussion**

In discussing linguistic landscapes within Japanese communities it is important to note the somewhat unique sociolinguistic context of the country as a whole in comparison to most other settings where linguistic landscape research has been conducted. As noted by Backhaus (2009), a distinct characteristic of the Japanese language is its uncontested status as the dominant language in Japan. Whereas most linguistic landscape studies examine issues of relative power, representation, and ethnolinguistic vitality (Laundry & Bourais, 1997; Kerry, 2012; Moriarty, 2014) Japan currently does not exhibit such contestations. Rather, foreign languages on signage in public spaces have emerged within broader internationalization and globalization movements, where Japan has found itself simultaneously more internationally oriented and coping with mobility trends that have brought more foreign visitors to its shores (Gottlieb, 2005). It is within this setting that this paper considers the state of the linguistic landscape in a small local resort area in Hokkaido, and attempts to reveal how this current state aligns with broader policy prescriptions for local economic revitalization through the promotion of overseas tourism.

The overall findings of this linguistic landscape survey of the Lake Toya spa area demonstrated an area dominated by monolingual signage, of which 80 percent was Japanese and almost 20 percent English. A breakdown of these results into official top-down and non-official bottom-up categories provides some insights into the origins and motivations behind the signage in this area. Official top-down signs comprised 27.7 percent of the sample, of which 55 percent were monolingual, and almost 45 percent multilingual. The high percentage of monolingual official signage, and inconsistent nature of official multilingual signs, appears to indicate a lack of any official municipal policy requiring foreign languages on public signage. This stands in contrast with other areas of Japan such as the Tokyo Metropolitan area, Shinagawa Ward, and Kitakyushu City where regulations dictate the use of foreign languages in pedestrian signs to promote ease of mobility for foreign visitors and residents (Backhaus, 2009; Wang, 2015). Official signage on prefectural road signs appear to follow regulations laid out in the Sign System Guidebook for Public Transport Passenger Facilities (cited in Backhaus, 2002) with standardized conventions concerning fonts, sizes, and translations (See Figure 1.1). In contrast, municipally-sourced street signs were non-standardized and distributed in an inconsistent manner. The signs in Figure 1.2 illustrate this inconsistency with the questionable informational value of the transliteration of Kohan Dori on the top sign, and the subsequent directional signs being monolingual Japanese. Further demonstrating the inconsistent distribution of languages in municipal street signs is an example providing directions only in Korean and Chinese (Figure 1.3). These examples speak to the need for a more consistent municipal policy regarding foreign languages in public signage in the area.

Bottom-up non-official signage represented 72 percent of the sample, with 62 percent being monolingual, and 37 percent bilingual. The high proportion of monolingual commercial

signage is surprising, particularly in a community which recently hosted an international summit, and hosts a large number of foreign visitors. Insight into the state of commercial signage in the area can be seen in the two business fronts represented in Figure 2. Both businesses offer boat cruises, rental boats, and other marine recreational activities. Despite offering similar

(1) (2) (3)

Figure 1: Prefectural and municipal official street signage

(a)

(b)

Figure 2: Examples of commercial business front signage

services, and being physically close to one another, the two businesses present quite different foreign language signage to their foreign visitors. The business at the top (2a) has a small single English price list in the bottom corner of its front window, while the business on the bottom (2b) offers a white board describing its prices and services, and welcoming customers in four languages. While the foreign language signage in both businesses appear to be largely ad hoc, and temporary in nature, the stenciled and sun-bleached example in 2a stands in stark contrast to the vibrant, well-kept, and exceedingly informational example in 2b. It is most probable that a lack of foreign language competency or resources drives foreign language signage provision in such cases; some businesses simply appear to be better equipped to provide multilingual signage. Guidelines and assistance for businesses in providing multilingual signage could be provided by local or regional chambers of commerce or business associations, particularly as making public spaces and services more negotiable would contribute to the overall tourist reception environment (see Cenoz & Gorter, 2009). Several regional and national chains bring multilingual marketing and signage expertise to the local Toya linguistic landscape, as can be seen in Figure 3. This sample, in which the permanent main sign is in Chinese, English and Japanese, and multilingual sub-signage in windows and banners all conspire to ease navigation of the commercial enterprise and its offerings, provides an example local businesses can draw upon in creating their own multilingual signage. Such permanent signage also carries semiotic value where through materiality and permanence a commitment to speakers of those languages is projected (see Cook, 2015).

Figure 3: Lake Toya drug store

## 5. Conclusion

The goal of this survey was to explore the linguistic landscape of the Lake Toya spa area

in order to assess its suitability and sufficiency for promoting tourism. The survey demonstrated an overall environment dominated by monolingual signage, with the multilingual signage present being of varying standards across both official top-down and non-official bottom-up signage. A standardized municipal policy and commercial multilingual signage support programs would contribute to the quality of the area's multilingual signage and would likely enhance foreign visitors' experiences in the area. The most significant limitation of this survey is the lack of interviews with foreign visitors themselves. The question of multilingual signage sufficiency would certainly be elucidated by such data. Further, examination of other regional areas and the establishment of models or benchmarks for good practice would also be fruitful avenues for future inquiry. With local regions rising to the challenge of meeting the needs of Japan's increasing numbers of tourists, further examination of the linguistic landscape will be required to improve the state of the country's reception environment.

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