Contextualizing Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Research by Comparing Notes from Long- And Short-Term Fieldwork

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Abstract

This paper studies the visible use of English – some decorative and some functional – contrasting with varying levels of fluency and varying attitudes for the need for English speech at all by Japanese in globalized contexts of Aoshima, Miyazaki. This data is discussed with reference to both global trends in this scholarly field of linguistic landscape and to the specific context of the data's presentation, Siem Reap, Cambodia. Siem Reap is unique among places discussed here because of its status as a UNESCO heritage site; this is reflected in the relatively strong level of English performance observed there.

In this working paper I will contrast a discussion of a local long-term project tracing touristic development at a beach in Miyazaki, Japan, within the context of my brief experiences as a traveler to conduct a presentation at a colloquium held in Siem Reap at the CALA (Conference for Asian Linguistic Anthropology) meeting in January 2019. This colloquium, titled "Beyond Multilingualism: Scaling Contemporary Asian Experiences", discussed contemporary experiences of linguistic diversity in various regions of Asia, asking whether recent work in contemporary linguistic anthropology developed in Europe and North America are adequate for analyzing linguistic diversity found in Asian societies. Particularly, to quote the symposium abstract:

> The tremendous varieties of experience in Asia offers us a diversity of multilingualisms, and each of the papers in this colloquium seeks to explore and extend the applicability of tools developed in the European and North American context to the specific forms of multilingualism found in Asia.…Drawing from recent work in linguistic anthropology, these papers each draw upon the concept of "sociolinguistic scale" (Blommaert 2007) to explore these diverse multilingualisms.

As a first-time visitor to Cambodia, traveling alone with no skills in Cambodian, I was curious about how easy it may be given those limitations. Signage was abundant, and to my relief everyone I contacted for communicative purposes had sufficient English to conduct business transactions. Hui (Annette) Zhao, a fellow conference attendee I met, was similarly relieved and has described her experience on a blog about multilingualism (Zhao 2019). This experience contrasted strongly with the scenario I was to describe in the colloquium, as follows.

In my presentation entitled "Scripts, orality, embodiment: code-mixing and silence in Japanese beachside sports and leisure recreational spaces," I spoke about the visible use of English in Japan, some decorative and some functional, contrasting with varying levels of fluency and varying attitudes for the need for English speech at all; in the staff at the beachside food truck space and the lifestyle recreation center areas I have been working on lately. Given the inclusion of words

such as 'code-mixing' (the use of more than one language in the same utterance) and 'silence' in the proposed title, there is an immediate difference of linguistic expertise experienced in touristic encounters in Siem Reap and in Aoshima, Miyazaki, a peripheral area of southern Kyushu in Japan. I have been in Miyazaki for eighteen years, first spending my weekends in and eventually becoming a resident of the Aoshima area, so I am well integrated and familiar with the situation prior to and during its revival in recent years. This is part of my larger project grounded in ELLA (ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis) (Blommaert, Jan & Ico Maly 2014:5) ongoing in Miyazaki during my residence in the area.

Places (specifically, a former gasoline stand and a grassy/sandy space between the beach and the public toilets) are, as part of the current development, newly branded and transformed. These places, known respectively as Surf City and Aoshima Beach Park, break with previous traditions to align with global English semiotics, following the aesthetics of 'global beach cool'. This alignment is aspirational from the perspective of sociolinguistic scale, given the physical and ideological distances of Miyazaki from Hawaii, Gold Coast, and southern California, English-dominant places from which its branding aesthetic has drawn inspiration, and aspirationally so, from the perspective of 'scale'. The data I examine reflect this genericity of 'global surf cool' in terms of scale for space, and the time that is indexed in this aesthetic is, of course, summertime. Aoshima lies at 33 degrees north latitude and does have four, even five distinct seasons, therefore it cannot be construed as tropical despite the palm trees. Given the sunny climate, amazingly stunning photography of this seemingly tropical mirage is possible year round, even on days in January like this one during the time of year I write this (January) when we surfers are clad in full wetsuits because the low is 0C with a high of 15C.

And though as a local I surf Aoshima, as a so-called mecca of surf culture, in truth the waves are usually much better in the surrounding breaks that are not undergoing this kind of touristic development and recent media attention. One reason for the disparity between signage and performance reflects the preexisting infrastructure and fame of Aoshima as a domestic travel attraction. The 'global cool' beach park is located at the foot of the bridge leading to Aoshima Island, on which is located a shrine. The shrine's fame, and one of the original tourist rationales, is its connection to the Kojiki book of Shinto religious origin narratives through the saga of the Dragon Princess and Mountain Brother. As Japanese postwar domestic travel developed, Aoshima was promoted as a popular honeymoon spot, since the shrine is lucky for couples. There is also a prior connection to the world of globalized sport, since the nationally famous Tokyo-based Yomiuri Giants baseball team (and other sports teams, increasingly) make their winter camp in Miyazaki. They leave a trail of Japanese linguistic landscape data of their own by visiting Aoshima Shrine, leaving messages to the gods on wooden placards, and as well leaving their signatures on 'shikishi' square cards posted in local restaurants, both of which also attract tourists.

These areas are celebrated locally as well on the web--even in Chinese-orientated tourism campaigns-- but there is no similar top-down attention seemingly English-dominant branding aesthetic does not extend to potential performance of English in these places, so the burden is laid on the (mostly precariat) workers. This situation is generally not perceived as a problem; there are multiple reasons for this that owe to the ideological relationship of the languages involved. Yet, as

Peter Backhaus observes, in Japan "English on signs providing a translation of Japanese text is mainly intended for the foreign population, while English on signs not providing a translation is for the Japanese reader...it appears that a minimal degree of proficiency in English has become a basic requirement in order to understand a sign in Japan these days (2011:45).

For Brussels, Berlin, and Tel Aviv, Eliezer and Miriam Ben-Rafael find that English, as a prestigious *lingua franca* in non-English-speaking countries, constitutes an asset for LL actors' self-presentation, even in underprivileged neighbourhoods where the language is not widely known (2015).

Monica Barni and Carla Bagna found that:

The data collected and analyzed in various cities in Italy confirmed the hypothesis that there is no direct relationship between the visibility of a language in an area and its vitality. This relationship depends on numerous linguistic, extralinguistic, and contextual factors: political, economic, etc. (2015)

The signs in my fieldsite are mostly nonofficial (i.e., commercial) and thus do not reflect nation level branding in any level of coordination or control (in contrast to, e.g., Macedonia's nation branding, see Graan 2016). In fact, now that the official beach season is over, most signs have been removed as the food shops are closed; the neighboring lifeguard stand does still have some multilingual signage for toilets and lockers, though most information is in Japanese. Notably, the lifeguard stand does provide wifi, the imagined solution to all linguistic barriers thanks to translation software. However, the predominance of English signage in the warm season does hearken to national level practices (see Backhaus's Tokyo data) as well as global English spread. The monolingual impact these signs create is not reflected in spoken practice, resulting in a situation which can be interpreted through several lenses beyond the internal situation described above. First, the majority of clientele are Japanese. Then, the majority foreign tourist base currently consists of Asian (Korean, Taiwanese, Hong Konger) group tours, with a minority visitorship from so-called native English speaking or English dominant countries. This may change with the upcoming 2020 Tokyo Olympics, for which Japan has promised a warm welcome, using the keyword 'omotenashi' (hospitality).

Nonetheless, the use of English and "global beach cool" image does echo Graan's assessment of nation-branding: "That is, the language of nation-branding advertisements often sounds the same. The photographs and videos—of notable historical sights, lovely beaches, and fine dining—tend to look the same" (86). In this case, "the same" means the same as in other beachside areas where English dominates. So given the Japanese situation of English signage without reliable verbal performance, we can see that the Japanese case aligns with that in the European countries discussed in the citations above, and in contrast to the Cambodian case in which locals were able to use functional English, and much signage was bilingual.

Other researchers have provided further context to the Japanese situation that can be helpful to further flesh out this contrast. As Patricia Wetzel states: "It is hard to describe to the uninitiated the place of English study in the Japanese psyche" referring to an advertisement aimed at "Everyman who has struggled with language training, especially the rote training that afflicts the

educational system leading up to entrance exams" (2011:14). That place is a resistant and ideology-laden point of trauma for many Japanese I have encountered and taught over the last 24 years. Another panelist recounted from her fieldwork how English as a part of Japanese preschool education was considered to be either a kind of play, or perhaps, a danger to development of Japanese skills. One major part of my professional development has been concerned with helping learners overcome such issues. The sociolinguistic scale of English relevant here reaches from (historically, in post-World War II context) the USA, via the Tokyo area as an urban hub and actual home of the producers of these global-looking beachside facilities, and into peripheral Miyazaki, out of the city center to Aoshima. One difference I found coming to Miyazaki 18 years ago was that in Miyazaki locals are happy to speak Japanese right away to someone like me who does not appear to have Asian features. In Tokyo it is not normally assumed by Japanese that non-Asian looking interlocutors can speak Japanese, which often results in real difficulty in transactions given the overall low proficiency levels of English. And though peripheral areas of Japan may be much more globalized than is ordinarily believed, including at in my department at a university that teaches Liberal Arts in English, there is undeniably a gap between the aspirational English signage and the reality of performance for workers in the English-labeled spaces. This gap indicates the English is there for decorative purposes. When global touristic encounters take place, the visitors I meet are often surprised when the veneer of English fails under pressure.

Discussion

From this local context we can see that though the current gap between English signage and actual performance by precariat service workers in Aoshima has potential problems, it is a fairly recent development in imagined contrast with earlier touristic manifestations largely domestic in orientation. This finding aligns with the international data showing gaps between signage and performance discussed above and hints that perhaps the answer to the conference colloquium question of whether current theories of sociolinguistic scale may be adequate in the Japanese case as well, is "yes". In contrast to the local situation, Siem Reap's impressive level of worker competence (and not only in English, but also in Chinese, Korean, French, and German--at least as languages spoken by temple guides I overheard during my brief time there) certainly reflects the prominence of global tourism aimed at Angkor Wat and other temples undergoing internationally supported reconstruction efforts. Recognition as a UNESCO Global Heritage site (and, said to be the largest worldwide) has clearly brought global tourism to Angkor Wat and other nearby temples, while there are more temples still enrobed by jungle foliage that may possibly be excavated in the future. Thus, the situation in Siem Reap differs from that of my local field site as another kind of scale that is reflected in the sociolinguistic data. Nonetheless, given that Japan overall expects an increase in global tourism with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the need for an increase in local language skills development (at least in English) is real and calls for local solutions.

Acknowledgements

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