



Language Hierarchies and Cultural Identity in Linguistic Landscape: The Case of Chikan Old Street in China

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Abstract

This study examines the linguistic landscape (LL) of Chikan Old Street, a historic district in Zhanjiang, Guangdong, through the lens of the SPEAKING model. As one of the most well-preserved historical districts in southern China, Chikan Old Street embodies a rich maritime heritage and commercial traditions, making it a compelling site for LL research. The study investigates the interaction between official language policies, regional linguistic identity, and globalization, providing insights into how language hierarchies are constructed in heritage sites. A mixed-methods approach is employed, integrating quantitative corpus analysis, qualitative semiotic interpretation, and public perception surveys. The findings reveal a clear stratification of language use: Chinese dominates official signage, with pinyin and English in subordinate positions, reflecting state-imposed linguistic norms. Private signage, however, demonstrates greater linguistic flexibility, incorporating Cantonese expressions, traditional Chinese characters, and creative bilingual adaptations. By highlighting the negotiation between top-down language standardization and bottom-up linguistic agency, this study contributes to broader discussions on language policy, cultural heritage preservation, and multilingual accessibility in historical districts. The findings underscore the need for improved linguistic planning, standardized translation policies, and greater public engagement in signage design to ensure that linguistic landscapes in heritage sites are both culturally authentic and globally navigable.

Keywords

Linguistic landscape; Chikan Old Street; Language hierarchies; Cultural identity

1. Introduction

The linguistic landscape (LL) of historic districts plays a vital role in shaping cultural identity and preserving local heritage. As a reflection of a region's sociolinguistic ecology, LL influences public perceptions of history, urban character, and language policy. In an era of globalization, balancing cultural preservation with international accessibility has become an increasingly important concern in LL research.

Located in Zhanjiang, Guangdong, China, Chikan Old Street stands as one of southern China's most well-preserved historical districts, showcasing a rich maritime heritage and commercial legacy. Its linguistic landscape—comprising official signage, commercial advertisements, and public inscriptions—reveals the interplay between state language policies, local identity, and global influences.

This study examines Chikan Old Street's LL through the SPEAKING model, analyzing language choice, power

dynamics, and cultural representation within a historical and commercial context. It explores the multilingual composition of signage, language hierarchy, and sociocultural implications of linguistic choices. By investigating how LL navigates between heritage conservation, language policy, and globalization, this research provides insights into the evolving role of LL in cultural sustainability.

2. Overview of Linguistic Landscape Research

Linguistic landscape (LL) research, positioned at the intersection of sociolinguistics, semiotics, and language policy, explores language use in public spaces and its implications for identity and power relations. Landry and Bourhis (1997) defined LL as the visibility and salience of languages on public signage, emphasizing its informational and symbolic functions. Over time, scholars have broadened LL research to examine language hierarchies, identity construction, and multilingualism in urban and heritage settings (Backhaus, 2007; Shohamy, 2012). Scollon and Scollon (2003) introduced geosemiotics, a key framework analyzing the spatial organization of language in public signage. This approach examines place semiotics, visual semiotics, and interaction order, highlighting how language choices interact with urban planning, policy enforcement, and community participation. Shohamy (2015) further emphasized LL's role in language policy implementation, arguing that bottom-up signage (commercial or grassroots initiatives) often contests top-down language regulations, producing hybrid linguistic landscapes that reflect both official discourse and local agency.

2.1 LL in Historical and Multilingual Contexts

With globalization, LL research has shifted focus from major cities to historical and culturally significant districts, investigating how public signage balances cultural heritage, identity, and economic modernization. Early research in bilingual and multilingual settings predominantly examined translation accuracy, but recent studies have emphasized LL's sociocultural role in shaping collective memory and local identity (Gorter & Cenoz, 2017). LL functions as a cultural archive, where handwritten calligraphy, classical inscriptions, and multilingual signage preserve linguistic heritage while adapting to globalization-driven tourism demands (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Pavlenko, 2010).

In China, LL studies highlight the linguistic stratification in historical districts, distinguishing top-down (government-imposed) and bottom-up (private) signage. Official signage prioritizes Mandarin Chinese in alignment with national language policies, while private signage often incorporates regional dialects, traditional Chinese characters, and Romanized elements (Fan & Peng, 2023; Wu & Zhan, 2022). These studies suggest tensions between state-driven standardization and grassroots cultural identity. Additionally, research on multilingual signage in historical districts reveals linguistic hybridity and translanguaging interactions, reflecting historical, economic, and cultural transformations (Rosendal & Amini Ngabonziza, 2023).

Despite scholarly progress, LL research lacks an integrated theoretical framework that fully captures language power relations, historical representation, and sociopolitical contestation. Researchers (e.g., Shang & Zhao, 2014) advocate for models like SPEAKING, multimodal discourse analysis, and sociocultural semiotics to deepen understanding of LL's role in cultural sustainability and identity negotiation.

2.2 The Applicability of the SPEAKING Model in LL Research

Among theoretical models in LL studies, Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING model, later extended by Huebner (2009) into LL research, provides a systematic framework for analyzing linguistic, social, and cultural dimensions of signage. Originally designed for oral discourse, the model has been successfully applied to public texts by capturing language presence, communicative intent, spatial placement, and sign-producer interactions.

The SPEAKING model comprises Setting & Scene (S), Participants (P), Ends (E), Act Sequence (A), Key (K), Instrumentalities (I), Norms (N), and Genre (G), offering a structured approach to analyzing language hierarchies, sociopolitical influences, and heritage narratives in LL research. It enables scholars to move beyond descriptive cataloging by examining how signage interacts with social structures, economic dynamics, and historical discourse.

The application of SPEAKING in this study aligns with the complexity of Chikan Old Street's LL, offering a multi-layered perspective that integrates language policy, cultural identity, and globalization. Unlike frameworks focused solely on language visibility or power relations, SPEAKING allows a holistic examination of LL as a tool for cultural representation, identity negotiation, and language planning. This study contributes to bridging LL research and heritage conservation, demonstrating how linguistic landscapes not only reflect cultural heritage but actively shape urban linguistic practices and sociopolitical engagement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Site

Chikan Old Street, as one of the most well-preserved historical districts in southern China, holds significant cultural and commercial value. Bordered by Guangxi Province to the west and the Pearl River Delta to the east, Zhanjiang has long been an economic and cultural intersection between China and Southeast Asia. Since the late 19th century, its commercial port activities have facilitated extensive linguistic and cultural exchanges, contributing to the city's distinctive blend of local dialects, trade languages, and colonial influences. As a former trade port with strong international influences, Chikan's LL exhibits traces of colonial legacies, commercial modernization, and contemporary multilingual adaptation, making it a compelling case for examining the coexistence of local, national, and global linguistic forces.

For the purpose of this study, the core area of Chikan Old Street was selected, covering major streets and landmarks that feature high linguistic signage density. The designated research area extends from Cunjin Bridge Park to Zhongshan First Road in the south and Jiuer Road in the north. Additionally, specific locations such as Datong Street, Old Street Pedestrian Street, Antique Culture Corridor, and former chamber of commerce sites were included to ensure a comprehensive dataset representing diverse linguistic and cultural elements.

3.2 Data Collection

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine the linguistic landscape (LL) of Chikan Old Street. The dataset was gathered through fieldwork, photographic documentation, and systematic categorization of signage.

A total of 182 signage samples were collected, comprising 60% official signage—including road signs, government-issued informational boards, and heritage site descriptions—and 40% non-official signage, such as commercial shop signs, private advertisements, and community-generated signs. The linguistic composition primarily features Mandarin Chinese, English, limited instances of Cantonese, and pinyin transliterations, with signage appearing in various script styles, including simplified and traditional Chinese, printed fonts, and handwritten calligraphy. These stylistic choices reflect both historical linguistic practices and contemporary regulatory influences.

To ensure a systematic analysis, signs were categorized by location and function, distinguishing between street names, commercial zones, and historical landmarks while also identifying directional, informational, and promotional signage. Additionally, the study examined language composition (monolingual, bilingual, multilingual) and inscription style (metal, wood, printed, engraved, handwritten) to assess the role of different materials in shaping linguistic visibility.

Photographic documentation provided a visual dataset for linguistic and semiotic analysis, capturing variations in spatial distribution and language hierarchies. Each photograph was recorded with metadata, including location, date, and function, enabling a comparative study of language choices and power dynamics in different signage contexts. Signs that were illegible, incomplete, or defaced were excluded to ensure data accuracy and reliability.

3.3 Analytical Procedures

This study employs a two-step approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to comprehensively analyze the linguistic landscape (LL) of Chikan Old Street. The quantitative analysis examines language distribution across Mandarin, English, Cantonese, and pinyin transliterations, assessing their hierarchical positioning in multilingual signage. By categorizing signage into official (top-down) and private (bottom-up) domains, the study evaluates how linguistic authority is structured between government-regulated and privately generated signage.

The qualitative analysis focuses on the semiotic interpretation of linguistic choices and design elements in both official and private signage. By analyzing visual and textual representations, the study explores how language use reflects underlying power structures and cultural ideologies. A comparative examination of top-down and bottom-up signage further reveals the contestation and negotiation of linguistic authority in public spaces.

By integrating corpus-based analysis, ethnographic observation, and theoretical modeling, this methodological framework provides a holistic investigation of Chikan Old Street's LL, addressing linguistic, sociocultural, and policy-related dimensions. The findings position LL as both a medium for cultural expression and a site of linguistic power negotiation, illustrating how language use in historical districts interacts with broader social and political forces.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the linguistic landscape (LL) of Chikan Old Street, examining the types of signage, language power relations, spatial distribution of linguistic codes, and public perceptions of language use in this historic district. By applying place semiotics and the SPEAKING model, the study explores how signage reflects cultural identity, historical narratives, and sociolinguistic hierarchies. The findings are organized into key themes corresponding to the study's research objectives.

4.1 Linguistic Landscape Typology and Distribution Patterns

The linguistic landscape of Chikan Old Street exhibits a diverse range of sign types, reflecting the interplay between official and private signage. Following Pavlenko's (2010) classification, the signage in Chikan Old Street is categorized into official signage (top-down), which includes government-placed street signs, informational boards, and historical plaques, and private signage (bottom-up), which consists of commercial shop signs, community-generated advertisements, and graffiti.

A notable semiotic diversity emerges from various signage forms, such as posters, historical plaques, calligraphy inscriptions, and vertical billboards. The distribution analysis reveals that instructional signs (54.9%) dominate official signage, emphasizing urban planning, tourism promotion, and heritage preservation. Meanwhile, commercial store signs (60.8%) constitute the majority of private signage, highlighting the district's commercial vibrancy and the role of local businesses in shaping the linguistic landscape. Linguistically, monolingual Chinese signage (70.3%) overwhelmingly prevails, with bilingual Chinese-English signage (25.8%) and minimal occurrences of Korean and English-only signs (Table 1). The predominance of Chinese script, including both simplified and traditional characters, underscores strong language policy enforcement and cultural identity reinforcement. Notably, Chinese pinyin is frequently used in place of English translations, prioritizing Mandarin phonetic accessibility over foreign-language inclusivity.

Table 1. The linguistic composition of signage in Chikan Old Street

Code Preference	Number	Frequency
Chinese (Chinese Pinyin included)	128	70.3%
Chinese+English	47	25.8%
English	3	1.6%
Chinese+English+Korean	2	1.1%
Korean+English	1	0.5%
Korean	1	0.5%
Total	182	100%

4.2 Language Power Relations and Hierarchical Positioning in Signage

The linguistic hierarchy in Chikan Old Street's signage reflects broader power dynamics, with Chinese consistently occupying the most prominent position in terms of font size, placement, and emphasis. English, primarily serving symbolic and touristic functions, follows as a secondary language, while other languages, such as Korean, appear infrequently, largely as a remnant of past internationalization efforts. This linguistic arrangement aligns with national language policies that prioritize Mandarin while accommodating selective multilingualism for economic and cultural purposes.

A clear distinction emerges between official and private signage. Government-regulated signs strictly follow standardized bilingual (Chinese + Pinyin/English) or trilingual (Chinese + Pinyin + English/Korean) formats, reinforcing linguistic uniformity. By contrast, private signage demonstrates greater linguistic flexibility, incorporating Cantonese expressions, traditional Chinese characters, and stylized typography. This adaptability is particularly evident in

commercial branding, where linguistic creativity enhances visibility and cultural resonance. A notable example is the café “Shígǒu Kāfēi” (literally, stone dog coffee), translated as “POWER COFFEE” rather than a direct phonetic rendering. This semiotic adaptation preserves the cultural symbolism of the stone dog while employing typographic stylization to attract consumer attention, illustrating how private signage merges heritage with modern branding strategies.



Figure 1. A creative bilingual private signage.

These findings highlight Chikan Old Street’s linguistic landscape as both a regulated and negotiated space, where state-imposed policies coexist with grassroots linguistic agency. While top-down signage ensures linguistic consistency, bottom-up signage reflects a dynamic linguistic ecology shaped by local identity and commercial adaptation. This interplay between institutional control and cultural expression underscores the broader role of LL in heritage districts as sites where national identity, local traditions, and global engagement intersect.

4.3 Language and Spatial Interaction in Chikan’s Historic Environment

The spatial organization of signage in Chikan Old Street reflects broader linguistic and cultural dynamics observed in historical districts, where language interacts with architectural aesthetics, tourism development, and local identity (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). The analysis identifies three primary spatial-emplacement patterns: decontextualized, situated, and transgressive signage, each representing a distinct relationship between language and space.

Decontextualized signage consists mainly of standardized, government-issued signs that prioritize regulatory clarity over cultural integration. These include modern aluminum road signs with blue backgrounds and white characters (see Figure 2), which, while functional for navigation, visually contrast with the district’s historical ambiance. Their placement underscores the tension between modern urban planning and heritage preservation.



Figure 2. An aluminum road sign.

In contrast, situated signage is deeply embedded in the district’s cultural landscape, reinforcing local identity and historical continuity. Examples include wooden plaques with engraved calligraphy, storefronts incorporating Cantonese lexical borrowings from English (e.g., *si do* for convenience stores), and decorative signs that blend

harmoniously with historical architecture. These signs, shaped by business owners and artisans, sustain cultural narratives and reflect grassroots linguistic agency, preserving Chikan's heritage as a former trading hub.

A third category, transgressive signage, includes unauthorized advertisements, commercial posters, and graffiti that disrupt the intended visual and linguistic order. Though fewer in number, these elements highlight the contested nature of public space, where official regulations intersect with grassroots expressions. Handwritten advertisements and calligraphy-based business signs demonstrate how local actors negotiate their linguistic environment, incorporating culturally resonant elements or deviating from imposed norms.

Ultimately, the spatial organization of signage in Chikan Old Street illustrates the interplay between state-led standardization and community-driven linguistic identity. While government policies regulate official signage, private actors actively shape the linguistic landscape, ensuring that language remains a dynamic and evolving feature of the district's cultural and commercial life.

4.4 Issues in Signage Design and Proposed Improvements

Despite the general coherence of Chikan Old Street's linguistic landscape, several inconsistencies in character usage, translation practices, and multilingual accessibility were identified. These issues highlight tensions between heritage preservation and regulatory standardization, impacting both readability and inclusivity.

A primary concern is the inconsistent use of traditional Chinese characters in commercial signage. While traditional characters enhance historical authenticity, their selective and irregular application, often mixed with simplified Chinese, creates visual and linguistic inconsistency. Such variation not only violates national language policies favoring simplified Chinese but also complicates readability for those unfamiliar with both scripts.

Translation inconsistencies also undermine signage clarity. The study found a lack of uniformity in English renderings of street names and site descriptions, with some signs relying on pinyin transliterations (e.g., *SHENG LI LU* instead of *Victory Road* in Figure 2), while others use direct English translations. This inconsistency reduces usability for international visitors, as pinyin is often unintuitive for non-Chinese speakers. Additionally, some English translations feature grammatical errors or awkward phrasing, affecting the accuracy of cultural and historical representation.

Moreover, multilingual signage remains limited, with over 70% of signs monolingual in Chinese. Although select government-issued signs provide Mandarin-English text, their distribution is inconsistent, leaving key tourist sites without adequate multilingual guidance. The diminishing presence of Cantonese lexical items in commercial signage further signals a shift toward Mandarin standardization.

To address these issues, the study suggests enhanced regulatory oversight and standardized translation guidelines to improve linguistic coherence. Encouraging local engagement in signage design and implementing structured multilingual signage policies would help balance heritage conservation with accessibility, ensuring Chikan Old Street remains both culturally authentic and internationally navigable.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the linguistic landscape (LL) of Chikan Old Street, revealing how language choices in signage reflect cultural heritage, language policy, and global-local interactions. Findings indicate that Mandarin dominates the linguistic hierarchy, with over 70% of signage being monolingual Chinese, while bilingual Chinese-English signs account for 25.8% and multilingual signage, including Cantonese or Korean, remains rare. This prioritization aligns with China's national language policy, reinforcing Mandarin standardization as the primary mode of public communication.

A clear linguistic hierarchy is evident, with official signage strictly adhering to government norms, prioritizing simplified Chinese and pinyin romanization, while private signage displays greater linguistic diversity. Traditional Chinese characters, Cantonese expressions, and creative typography are frequently observed in commercial signage, reflecting local cultural identity and grassroots agency. The study identifies three primary patterns of signage emplacement: decontextualized signage, such as modern road signs, which follow standardized urban planning but lack historical integration; situated signage, including wooden plaques and calligraphic storefronts, which align with the district's cultural identity; and transgressive signage, such as graffiti and informal advertisements, which disrupt the intended linguistic order but demonstrate bottom-up linguistic engagement.

Despite its overall coherence, Chikan's linguistic landscape faces challenges related to translation inconsistencies,

lack of multilingual signage, and irregular pinyin use. Addressing these issues requires standardized translation policies, stakeholder engagement in signage design, and contextually appropriate multilingual strategies. This study contributes to LL research by highlighting heritage districts as sites of linguistic negotiation, where national policies, regional identity, and commercial forces interact. Future research should expand to other historical districts, explore temporal changes in signage, and incorporate digital linguistic landscapes to offer a more comprehensive understanding of heritage representation in multilingual contexts. Ensuring cultural authenticity and international accessibility in Chikan Old Street's LL will be key to its sustainable development as both a historical site and a global cultural space.

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