

Typography, layout and language hierarchy: a linguistic landscape analysis of Hong Kong, China catering signs

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Abstract. This paper examines how multimodal resources, including typefaces, layouts, and languages, contribute to the construction of Cantonese identity within the Hong Kong, China language landscape. While previous research has explored text features such as code-mixing, Chinese-English translation, and Cantonese vernacular characters, visual elements have not been adequately addressed. Utilizing multimodal discourse analysis and visual semiotics, this study analyzes samples from cha chaan tengs, dai pai dongs, and trendy local eateries. Handwritten fonts embody grassroots neighborhood culture, decorative fonts signify modern local vitality, and the Chinese-English typographic hierarchy reflects local language subjectivity. Previous studies have exhibited a text-oriented bias. This research provides insights into Cantonese culture, although the sample coverage is limited. Future studies may benefit from a longitudinal perspective.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, multimodal design, catering design, Cantonese culture, visual semiotics

1. Introduction: background and significance

Language landscape is a combination of language landscape and representation of languages on public signs. It means identity, cultural globalization, and revitalization of minority languages [1]. Hong Kong, China is a predominantly Cantonese city, and its catering industry is deeply Cantonese. The shop signs of these establishments are not only commercially useful but also represent Cantonese vocabulary, language and urban folk customs. They are therefore a great subject for multimodal linguistic landscape analysis [1]. Although restaurant signage is a part of Hong Kong, China, there is not a lot of research on how its visual language (besides verbal text) contribute to building Cantonese culture. This is why typography, imagery and layout are important semiotic resources rather than decorative elements. In this context, this study is a very important theoretical and practical basis. Theoretically, prior studies on Hong Kong, China's linguistic landscape focus on code switching, Chinese-English translation, and Cantonese vernacular characters at text level [2, 3]. The visual dimension of signage (typeface, image-text interaction, layout, and color) have not been studied much.

This paper combines multimodal discourse analysis with visual semiotics to extend the analytical scope of linguistic landscape research to include the whole semiotic set of restaurant signage. Typography and Pictorial choices are active meaning-making resources indexing Cantonese identities from grassroots colloquialism to nostalgia. This paper responds to Järlehed's [4] call to contextualize particular sign genres as historically and culturally configured semiotic sets, as well as Lee's [2] call for a more interesting connection between

multimodality and translation in bilingual cities. Practically and culturally, this study underscores the role of commercial signage in preserving and enhancing the visibility of Cantonese as a lived, embodied language. Hong Kong, China's catering landscape is changing because chain stores, internet-famous eateries and standard digital signage are becoming more popular. Traditional handwritten signboards and vernacular styles are increasingly threatened. It can also highlight typographic and image-text strategies that encode Cantonese culture memory, which helps preserve Hong Kong, China's intangible cultural heritage, and can help design practice, showing how local restaurateurs and designers can use multimodal resources to create authentic place-based identities without reducing Cantonese culture to nostalgia or commercial spectacle, and how language hierarchy is represented visually in signage by different sizes, positions and weights. This empirical evidence enhances the understanding of the ongoing negotiation among Cantonese, English, and Putonghua in Hong Kong, China's public space, a negotiation that is central to contemporary discussions about local identity and linguistic vitality [5].

2. Research status

In recent years, the study of linguistic landscapes has moved from general observations to context-specific semiotic analysis, thus providing a strong foundation for urban public signage culture. Language landscape studies benefit from studying particular sign genres, which are considered as complex historical and cultural configurations of semiotic resources and affordances [4]. Particular types of signage and cultural implications are emphasized in this study for catering signage in Hong Kong, China. Recent studies have shown the link between linguistic landscapes and local social and cultural contexts. The possibility of studying social and cultural realities using linguistic landscapes, as shown in previous studies, motivates the current work, which links bilingual and monolingual neon signs to various contextual factors [6].

Despite the progressive development of relevant research, significant gaps remain in the integration of linguistic landscape, translation studies, and multimodal visual analysis. Lee [2] acknowledged that the linguistic landscape is an emerging area of inquiry within translation studies; however, its connection to translation, particularly in bilingual or multicultural cities, has not garnered adequate academic attention. This research deficiency is also evident in localized studies of Hong Kong, China's linguistic landscape. Song [3] employed a functional perspective on translation to analyze Hong Kong, China's bilingual street signs, comparing the Chinese and English texts on a single road sign to illustrate the distinct functions each language serves in the local context. However, this study did not address the multimodal aspect. Most existing research primarily focuses on the textual and translational dimensions of signs, neglecting visual multimodal elements such as fonts, layout, and images that convey cultural meanings.

To clarify the background of Hong Kong, China's localized language culture, this paper notes that Hong Kong, China is predominantly Cantonese city, where cantonese is spoken and written in increasing numbers [7, 8]. Cantonese dialect, regarded as the most popular after Putonghua, is part of local culture and Hong Kong, China is the most dynamic economic region in China. The different Cantonese language and culture influences language power structure and symbolic meanings of public signs in Hong Kong, China, as evidenced by recent urban linguistic semiotics. The data indicates language-related desires do not revolve only around English; they can also focus on local languages which are often fetishized as symbolic resources for distinction. Consequently, alternative indexical readings are important as they highlight shifting power dynamics among language varieties. The pursuit of capital and power is not exclusively achieved through prominent displays of English; rather, typically subaltern language varieties can similarly express these desires under favorable conditions [9].

In summary, studies recognize the cultural significance of local dialects as reflected in urban linguistic landscapes but lack a targeted multimodal analysis of Hong Kong, China catering signage, which prevents systematic study of how visual design shapes Cantonese identity, which makes this study essential and novel.

3. Research methods and data processing

This paper uses the language landscape as the main theory, and uses multimodal discourse analysis and visual semiotics for data analysis. Field-collected photographs of catering signage in Hong Kong, China consist of storefront signs, window labels, promotional posters, and printed menus. All sample photographs are collected from non-tourist areas in the New Territories, including local traditional cha chaan tengs, dai pai dongs and trendy eateries, excluding tourist-oriented restaurants and international fast food chains. Three analytical dimensions are considered: typeface features, image-text layout, and linguistic-typographic hierarchy. Typical cases are selected for close qualitative visual interpretation to study how multimodal semiotic resources construct Cantonese identity.

4. Analysis of results

4.1. Handwritten typefaces

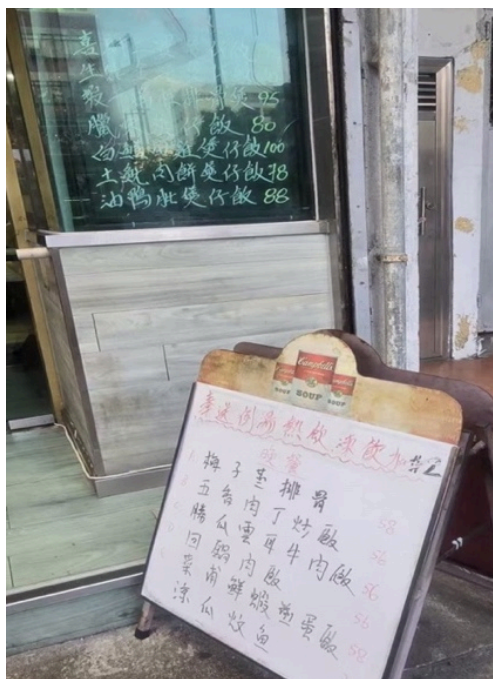


Figure 1. The glass panel and the freestanding sign

Handwritten typefaces often found in local Hong Kong, China eateries like street-side dai pai dongs or cha chaan tengs are bold, eye-catching and simple, as graffiti without calligraphic rules, and resemble the casual, lively, down-to-earth cantonese language. They reproduce the casual atmosphere of everyday neighborhood conversation and create a touch of intimacy. This design reinforces local eateries' masochistic identity and is a good fit for Cantonese communities. Handwritten typefaces are a major text in Hong Kong, China's urban "sea

of street characters" typefaces convey more than textual information; they are visual-social mode of space, materiality, and local food culture.

Figure 1 (The glass panel and the freestanding sign) shows that the glass panel and the freestanding sign are written in fast runningscript handwriting. Some strokes are informal (some simplified or skipped) and not strictly calligraphic. Dish names and prices are written in a freeform way without neat alignments, and are color-coded: red for headings, black for dish names and pink for prices. This is common in traditional Hong Kong, China dai pai dong, cha chaan teng and claypot rice eateries. The menu and price can be easily changed. The handwritten typeface is rustic and speaks to the habits and nostalgia of older generation Hong Kong, China residents. Handwritten brush script softens commercial tone and creates the image of a "neighborhood old-timers' eatery", which is a Cantonese-speaking community's emphasis on human connection and grassroots authenticity.

4.2. Artistically designed decorative typefaces

Artistically designed decorative typefaces in trendy Hong Kong, China retail merge Cantonese colloquial expressions with youthful language to convey promotional information and maintain local linguistic identity. These fonts utilize hierarchical layouts to highlight key marketing details, adapting Cantonese semiotic resources to balance local cultural characteristics with broader market consumer demands.



Figure 2. Restaurant poster

Decorative typefaces and round cartoon-style fonts are used in new Hong Kong, China style cafés and trendy local stores operated by younger generations. They combine traditional Cantonese phrases with modern young words preserving local language traits and modern expressions. Figure 2 (Restaurant poster) contains promotional text in Traditional Chinese and combines the Cantonese words Dai Sik to convey "good value for money and delicious food". The local language of Hong Kong, China is preserved. The content consists entirely of functional information: promotional periods, discounts, original prices, voucher terms, set meal details, and surcharge options convey special offers and stimulate consumption. Dates and main headings are arranged top, discount and price speech bubbles are left, food images are placed centrally, set meal contents and add-on purchase items are placed bottom. Headings and prices are dominantly dominant and fine print details are left bottom sections.



Figure 3. Fast food restaurant poster

Figure 3 (Fast food restaurant poster) shows a paper with Cantonese phrases like *taan* (to enjoy) and *lok che* (to leave the car) which promote locality in the English slogan of the brand. Instead of offer terms, the paper emphasizes catchphrase-like marketing, product codes and app usage prompts. Horizontal layout has logo on left, slogan on center (surrounded by food), product information and functional prompts in bottom left and bottom right respectively. Culturally, the poster balances locality with larger market appeal. Key Hong Kong, China commercial Cantonese phrases are kept with accessible typography for different audiences. This shows how local Cantonese semiotic resources can be adaptable in chain-store consumer culture.

4.3. Chinese-English typographic hierarchies and cultural identity

The typographic hierarchy of Hong Kong, China eateries reflect language and culture. Hong Kong, China is predominantly bilingual in Chinese and English, though languages such as Tagalog, Filipino, Hindi, Urdu, Nepali, Punjabi, Bahasa Indonesia, and Thai are also spoken in various parts of the territory [10-13]. Menus with western terms emphasize Traditional Chinese visually, whereas English is left to second annotations. Local language agency is preserved for foreign cuisine. Neighborhood Cha Chaan Tengs use Traditional Chinese only, which creates a community identity for local Cantonese-speaking customers.



Figure 4. The digital canteen menu

Figure 4 (This digital canteen menu) reflects the typical Chinese-English hierarchy found in local eateries in Hong Kong, China. Large bold Chinese characters dominate the visual center and convey most information. English appears as supplementary annotations beneath the Chinese text, whereas tourist-oriented restaurants emphasize English. Although different foreign-inspired foods are included in the menu, the hierarchy is dominated by Chinese, with English as the second language. This design emphasizes local Cantonese culture while accommodating non-Cantonese visitors.



Figure 5. Restaurant takeout menu

The restaurant takeout menu (Figure 5) for Western style casual food features many English terms, but follows the Chinese-English typography typical of local eateries in Hong Kong, China. Traditional Chinese is the main visual element for headings and section labels, while English is the second main categorization. In contrast to tourist eateries, English is not at the expense of Chinese. This reflects how local eateries keep Cantonese-Chinese language, while taking into account foreign food culture.



Figure 6. Cha chaan teng menu

Figure 6. (cha chaan teng menu) from a traditional New Territories cha chaan teng exemplifies a long-established local eatery. Large Traditional Chinese characters are the only linguistic medium used for the restaurant title, dish names, section headings, and fine print notes, with no English translations provided. Primarily catering to Cantonese-speaking locals rather than foreign visitors, the menu highlights the visual dominance of Cantonese Chinese and reflects the establishment's community-oriented cultural identity.

5. Conclusion

This study based on linguistic landscape theory examines how the design of catering signs in Hong Kong, China (typefaces, image-text layouts, and language hierarchy) reflect Cantonese culture. With the rise of China, Cantonese has become increasingly important symbol of Hong Kong, China identity. Leung and Lee [5] argue that "Cantonese dominance in Hong Kong, China is not a result of external threat to indigenous

language but a choice by the inhabitants". Handwritten fonts convey grassroots authenticity, decorative fonts convey a modern vitality, and Chinese dominated the image in Hong Kong, China reflects local language subjectivity and a nostalgic city mood). As important multimodal carriers, restaurant signage significantly impacts Hong Kong, China's local catering and culture identity. It addresses textual bias by highlighting the semiotic value of visuals. The present offers both theoretical and practical insights for preserving Cantonese culture and local Hong Kong, China design. This study indicates that modern signage design should ideally retain local Cantonese visuals in order to counter commercial homogenization. Future work should try to diversify samples and use longitudinally to study the evolution of Hong Kong, China's linguistic landscape.

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