

# Challenging the “Public or Private” Dichotomy in Linguistic Landscape Studies

Li Yi

Xinhua College of Sun Yat-Sen University, Dongguan, 523133, China

**Keywords:** Semiotic landscape, Public or private dichotomy, China’s linguistic landscape, Guangzhou, Ecolinguistics

**Abstract:** This paper is a preliminary study aiming to tackle the semiotic landscape issues peculiar to the ecolinguistic phenomena found in China’s southern city of Guangzhou. With new data emerged from the above-mentioned corpus, it is necessary to expand the theoretic framework on top of the conventional linguistic landscape (LL) methodology. On the one hand, this paper reviews previous studies that involved the unfamiliar “middle-ground” between the categories of public and private signage, which often posed questions to the “public or private” dichotomy that is usually and widely taken for granted in many semiotic landscape studies. On the other hand, this paper offers a longitudinal case study to discuss the possibility of opening up a new category of LL data to fill the gap, which might complement the conventional LL’s dichotomic scheme.

## 1. Introduction

The semiotic landscapes of China are unfamiliar to the West and they could potentially provoke the re-examination of the relationship between signage and its geo-cultural circumstance, thus force the tourist to question the existing linguistic stereotypes of spatial practices and related theories, as Chmielewska (2010: 282) put it, “When visiting a Chinese city for the first time, [...] Everything is new and noteworthy”. But for me and some other researchers, taking a stroll in the streets of Guangzhou, a cosmopolitan city in southern China, and placing the tourist gaze on the array of urban linguistic landscape is not an unfamiliar experience (Li, 2011; Wu & Zhan, 2017). Abiding by the conventional theories and methodologies developed by Bourhis and Landry (1997), Scollon & Scollon (2003), previous Chinese linguistic landscape observations are fruitful in discovering the neologism of signs and the multilingualism that are distinctive in China, but are limiting in spotting some other features that might be more China-specific, and could potentially challenge the basic grounding of the existing linguistic landscape traditions.

## 2. “Public or Private” Dichotomy: Significance and Limitations

The frequently cited dichotomy of signs, namely to distinguish them into ‘private’ and ‘government’ (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) or ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ (Ben-Rafael et al, 2001) , albeit not without question, seem to be accepted and practiced widely in a large number of studies concerning semiotics in place. The former demarcation gives examples of private signs: commercial signs on storefronts and business institutions (e.g. retail stores and banks), commercial advertising on billboards, and advertising signs displayed in public transport and on private vehicle (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 26); and of public (government) signs: public signs used by national, regional, or municipal governments in the following domains: road signs, place names, street names and inscriptions on state buildings including ministries, hospitals, universities, town halls, schools, metro stations, and public parks (ibid). Ben-Rafael et al (2001) followed this approach and went on further to subdivide the areas into a coding scheme containing sixteen variables, which has been applied by other researchers such as Cenoz and Gorter (2004). Although Blommaert (2013: 53) does not follow this distinction but opts for a functional-oriented typology that consists of three broad categories that divide the signs by their ‘lifespan’, publicity signs and the commercial signs fall into different categories, with the former in ‘Permanent signs’, serving a landmark function, and the latter in ‘Event-related signs’, which have recruitment functions.

All the major private-public or public-private distinctions discussed appear to be clean cut and no 'middle ground' ever exists, thus it may offer a problematic starting point for researchers to decide their themes, whether it is to examine the status and power that are reflected in the official semiotic objects, or to explore the 'grass roots' identity and aspirations of its members as manifested in the private semiotic landscapes, or to analyze the power relations within the community when taking public and private signs together. Furthermore, these similar frameworks of division seem to assume that all the signs can be divided as prescribed, which in reality the process could turn out to be complicated, and the result conflicts the stereotypes.

### 3. Previous Attempts Questioning the Dichotomy of either 'Public' or 'Private'

There have been arguments that confront such a public-private dichotomic division. Firstly, the underlying rivalry relationship might not be justified, Kallen (2010: 42) suggest that 'the contrast between 'top down' and 'bottom up' signages works best on the assumption that these different types of signage are in opposition within the same system, representing different interlocutors vying for the same structural position in the landscape. This assumption, though, is contrary to a great deal of everyday experience: the state is not in the business of opening hairdressers or small shops, and small shop owners do not usually take to rebelling streets.' Kallen argues that street name signs and small shop signs are not directly competing, but live in 'different, if parallel, universes' (ibid). Secondly, the 'from below' linguistic landscapes are prone to the influence of the government, since observations of commercial signs overshadowed by 'top down' policies are not rare, as Coupland (2010: 79) discovered in his study of the Welsh linguistic landscapes, "what should count as linguistic landscaping 'from below' is less clear, partly because commercial initiatives (which Backhaus considers to be 'from below') have their own 'from above' qualities". In this regard, commercial signage voluntarily indexing non-profit environment messages could potentially be a real-life example of private-public dual discourse sign.

In Dray's examination of Jamaican signage (Dray, 2010: 109), a fast food KFC sign uses a slogan in the vernacular 'Nice up Your City // Nice up Yourself' to position itself as caring for a local community. Dray is careful enough to avoid using the term 'private', or 'bottom-up', but rather 'commercially-oriented signs', which leaves room for discussion as to what type of sign it is. The core image on this sign is commercial advertising, the peripheral 'Nice Up Your City' probably urges the viewer to behave themselves and keep the urban landscape nice and clean, which is indexical of a public service message usually initiated by the municipal government, though irrelevant the latter may seem, they are neatly designed and stay appropriately together on this one metal sign.

When Scollon & Scollon studied the semiotic aggregate in the corner of Tat Chee Avenue and To Yuen Street in Hong Kong, they categorized the discourses in space into 15 types, which fall into 4 general categories: 1. regulatory discourses: municipal; 2. Infrastructural discourses: municipal; 3. commercial discourses; 4. transgressive discourses (Scollon & Scollon, 2003: 180-181). Once again, municipal and commercial discourses are clearly distinguished from each other. However, the Scollons claim that this categorization does 'not make any clear distinction among discourses nor to determine exactly how many there might be, [...] they just want to demonstrate there are multiple, partly overlapping, but nevertheless distinct discourses operating within this semiotic aggregate' (2003: 185). To deal with the complexity between genres of discourse, The Scollons went on to advocate the idea of 'interdiscursive dialogicality', which means 'several discourses co-exist simultaneously in a particular semiotic aggregate but none of the discourses is really internally altered by the presence of the other discourse. They operate quite independently semiotically' (2003, 193).

The challenging part is on what level the interdiscursive dialogicality can be valid, such as the case of the standalone KFC sign discussed above, where commercial discourse and public discourse co-exist within one sign, which is a much smaller unit than a semiotic aggregate that the Scollons defined as a particular place that is the result from the convergence, intentional or not, of multiple discourses (2003: 194). Since the interdiscursive dialogicality gives the semiotic aggregate its most

interesting characteristics but which is also most difficult to capture (ibid), it is similarly worthwhile to dig deeper into the interplay between different discourses within certain signs, which may give rise to a new category of signs in terms of semiotic discursivity, and shed light on some of the distinct features of semiotic landscapes in China and other ‘exotic’ places.

#### 4. An Oddity: Public Signage with Private Discourse Embedded

Among the researchers of semiotic landscape, there has been a favorable inclination towards the private sector, since the private ones usually appear to be more diverse, and reflect more accurately the multilingual reality of a particular area or location (Jaworski, 2010:10), by contrast, the government linguistic landscapes are regarded to be more monotonous within its formal boundaries, thus leaving less room for semiotic discussion. However, when a researcher is strolling in the traditional streets or modern avenues in Guangzhou, placing his/her tourist gaze around the urban semiotic aggregate, it is hard for him/her not to notice the existence of the oversized billboard screens around the lower part of buildings, and the small posters being posted on bus stops, public park fences and other communal places. The researcher might not comprehend what their contents are if they cannot read Chinese, but the similar, usually identical layout, styling, typography and color patterns that these screens and posters share would be an important clue to the reader: they are designed to be highly uniform in their presence, and their distribution are so widespread that in almost any given urban semiotic landscape, they are ‘hard not to notice’, if not ubiquitous. The uniformity across locations within the city, thus the ‘decontextualized’ characteristics of these signs, be it large screens or small posters, tend to make researchers lose interest because they carry an imprint of uniformed government signage, but they should not be overlooked. Since interesting semiotic hybridity phenomena are taking place.



Fig.1 A Public-Private Hybrid Sign, Guangzhou, China. 2017

Figure 1 is one typical example of the uniformed large screens posted on building walls; it is approximately 10 x 3 meters in size and mounted at about 6 meters above ground without visible framing. The layout follows a Chinese typographic convention, with main message on the left and ‘signature’ of the producer at the lower right corner, and a colorful plant-like graphic with Guangzhou characteristics is on the right to decorate the entire sign. To begin with, the producer use the ‘We’ strategy to involve the readers as insider by using ‘Our values’ as the form of address to open this public announcement, note the small fonts located at the very upper-left corner. However, tourists from the globe may immediately recognize the gray English words in the mid-right position --- ‘core socialist values’, which is juxtaposed by its Chinese equivalent above them, the nine larger, bold-type Chinese characters read ‘She Hui Zhu Yi He Xin Jia Zhi Guan’, below the English, is the content of such values, they are presented in Chinese only, with neat calligraphic typeface and even spacing.

These are well-thought-out notions, each with positive connotations, the first line from the left,

namely, 'Prosperity, Democracy, Civility, Harmony, Freedom, Equality', and the second line from the left, 'Justice, the Rule of Law, Patriotism, Dedication, Integrity, Friendship'. The two-line 'signature' part at the lower right, marking the initiators of this sign, the typography of which also follows a politically-inclined Chinese convention, the Communist Party comes first in the first line, and government comes after in the second line, Namely, in English, 'Communist Party of China (hereinafter referred to as CPC) Working Committee of Linhe Street, Tianhe District' for the first line, 'Linhe Subdistrict Office of Tianhe District', which is affiliated to the Guangzhou municipal government, in the second line.

It's notable that even the CPC line and government line have different number of characters, normally resulting in different lengths, but spacing are carefully added to the second line so the two lines of words are exactly aligned from head to tail. This alignment is typical of government signs in China which has a particular emphasis on uniformity is the standard. Oddly though, there is one single character 'protrudes' out from the alignment, 'Xuan' (publicize), indexing a discourse of government authority, further adding an aura of formality in Chinese.

So far, the analysis convinces us that the discourse on this large screen generally falls into a typical public service sign category, with rigid typography and articulated spacing, it conveys a message from the CPC and government to educate the general public about socialist values that 'we' Chinese people should all be familiar with, perhaps also put into practice. However, at the lower right, an 11-digit cellular phone number in bright white that stands out from the sign would not escape the tourist gaze, to its left, the Chinese meaning 'Advertising Space to Let', it is an entirely commercial discourse that is addressing to a different and particular audience who desires to put their Ads up here on the screen or somewhere else.

Who produces this bit of information is unknown, could it be the CPC and government, or someone behind the phone number, or both? This short discourse in white seems to disrupt or even defy all those in black, the 'recruitment functions' of this number indexes a commercial participant reaching out to the potential clientele, if such a deal is made, could the public service message on this sign be overthrown and replaced by some commercial advertisement? In Fairclough's terms (2003), this bit of commercial discourse here is about activity exchange, whereas the public service announcement centers more on the exchange of knowledge. However, the activity of selling ad space is likely to be in a jeopardizing position to the public service information, more baffling yet, is the coexistence of 'public' and the 'private' inscriptions on this particular sign, has not been in place for a short time, but over a period of at least 4 years, sees Figure 2 for an older version of screen deployed in the same space in 2013.



Fig.2 The Year 2013 Version Mounted on the Same Signboard Place, Guangzhou, China.

Signs only become meaningful and deployable as signs because they have been moved into place (Blommaert 2013: 118), so judging from the protective films on the outer frame have not been completely peeled off, this sign is still in the process of installation, which is indicative of its 'pre-textual' condition that precedes its synchronic deployment. However, we can still find that it

possesses the landmark function and universal readership of a government publicity sign: A). the background image is a collage of the landmark architectures of the Guangzhou city, ranging from the iconic Five-Ram Statue to the ancient towers on the left, with the skyscrapers being built recently stretching to the right. B). the key message conveyed by the eight bold-type Chinese characters in red is clear, calling up the public's effort 'To Create a National Civilised City'. C). the producer's name is also placed at lower right, 'Guangzhou Municipal Office of Creating a National Civilised City'.

Besides the commonalities typical of a public sign, it also bears a commercial inscription similar to the 'later' sign we analyzed earlier, with not only one but two phone numbers printed in tandem, occupying the lower middle part, and four Chinese characters 'Zhao Zu Re Xian' introducing them, meaning '(Ad Space)To Let Hotline'. Its recruitment function of letting an ad space has become more forward by using the business-associated word 'Re Xian' in Chinese, even though it is literally translated into English as 'hotline', but in Chinese it rarely entails a phone number used in an emergency situation, nor does it refer to the hotline between government leaders to deal with an emergency. The connotations of 'Re Xian' are more closely related to the service sector, e.g. Ad Hotline, Rental Hotline, than to the government, e.g. Mayor's hotline.

## 5. Discussion

By taking together the observations on Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, we may have longitudinal, if not diachronic, picture of pattern of the screen. In Blommaert's terms (2013:107), the discourse on the screen is 'polycentric and multifilar', distinctive public and private threads simultaneously develop on the same sign, they are not in harmony, but still coexist within a broader logic of the system, enduring a long time span. It is interesting to note that the inscriptions on Fig.1 and Fig.2 are completely different, in the contents of the public messages and the actual private 'To Let' numbers, yet they share very similar and enduring patterns that are generalizable and predictable. Here are some of the examinations of the similar semiosis, or interdiscursivity process taking place on two versions of this one sign over 4 years' change:

(1)According to Scollon & Scollon's geosemiotics (2003), the preferred code / fonts are the Chinese public service messages, which are printed in larger fonts, taking a more central position, thus making them more prominent, or have a louder 'voice'. The background images or accompanying graphics also serve for this CORE public messages, which index the Chinese government's intention to advocate the public to participate in building a better community or achieving a better life. The producers of the public messages are political or government bodies, which are clearly inscribed, excluding any possible private 'authorship'.

(2)The peripheral code / fonts are the Chinese 'Zhao Zu', or 'To Let' and the phone number(s), which are printed in smaller yet still recognizable fonts in the lower center position, announcing a moderate 'voice'. Although no graphics or images serve for this PERIPHERAL commercial message, with no relevant producer could be spotted, they index a particular group of commercial readers, who perhaps are among the readers of the public message, to attract their attentions to publicize their ads here or elsewhere.

(3)This Core / Peripheral relationship of the public and private inscriptions are intentionally designed and produced, neither is made for an ad-hoc situation or through 'add-ons' layering in Scollon & Scollon's terms (2003: 137), which means one sign is not from the original semiotic design, covers on top of the other. Since the large screens are issued by the government bodies, each inscription ought to have gone through rigorous review and have been legally sanctioned, though they might not be in harmony, they are not supposed to be transgressive to each other.

This longitudinal observation sparks our interests in the deeper sociolinguistic dynamics come into play on this screen. Putting disputes of the effectiveness of the public messages aside, if an Ad space commercial remains in place for several years, without any change actually taking place, could this stagnation suggest that it is a failed commercial by itself? We may pose other intriguing questions from broader perspectives: What is the linguistic situatedness of this screen? What is the ownership structure of this screen? What schemes this screen has to operate within? What are the

ideological driving forces underneath? How does it change over time? These are all begging for further studies.

### **Acknowledgment**

This work was part of the results of the project Towards the Ecolinguistic Landscaping in Guangdong (grant number GD17WXZ33) sponsored by the 2017 Specialized Research Fund of Foreign Languages from the Guangdong Social Sciences “13th Five-Year Plan” planning projects, P.R. China.

### **References**

- [1] Ben-Rafael, E. et al. Linguistic landscapes as symbolic construction of the public space: the case of Israel. Gorter, D. (ed.) *Linguistic Landscape: A New Approach to Multilingualism*. Clevedon/Buffalo/Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 2006.
- [2] Blommaert, Jan. *Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes: Chronicles of Complexity*. Bristol/Buffalo/Toronto: Multilingual Matters. 2013.
- [3] Cenoz, J. and Gorter, D. Linguistic landscapes and minority languages. Gorter, D. (ed.) *Linguistic Landscapes: A New Approach to Multilingualism*. Clevedon/Buffalo/Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 2006.
- [4] Coupland, Nikolas. Welsh Linguistic Landscapes ‘From Above’ and ‘From Below’. Jaworski, A. and C. Thurlow. (Eds.) *Semiotic Landscapes: Language, Image, Space*. Continuum, 2010
- [5] Chmielewska, Ella. Semiosis Takes Place or Radical Uses of Quaint Theories. Jaworski, A. and C. Thurlow. (Eds.) *Semiotic Landscapes: Language, Image, Space*. Continuum, 2010.