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Abstract

The study investigates the language use on the signage of public spaces in Singapore's Chinatown by mapping the linguistic landscape (LL) in the region. The study aims to contribute to an in-depth understanding of the formation of LL in Singapore's Chinatown and to provide baseline data for possible further replication to examine the diachronic change of Chinatown’s LL in the long run. The main objective of this study is to sketch an overall picture of LL in Singapore's Chinatown through quantitative and qualitative data analyses of the street signage collected from field visits, with careful attention to the dominant language(s) appearing in the signs, different features of top-down and bottom-up signs as well as functions of English and Chinese in the local linguistic ecology.

A total of 831 instances of signs in the form of photographs collected from Singapore's Chinatown constitute the database for the present study. Specifically, 269 signs are from top-down domain and 562 signs are from bottom-up domain. Combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis, the study attempts to address three research questions concerning the LL of Singapore's Chinatown, which are listed as follows.

1. What language plays a dominant role in the LL of Singapore's Chinatown?
2. What are the top-down and bottom-up LL features in Singapore's Chinatown?
3. What are the functions of English language and Chinese language in the formation of such LL?
The results show that English has an absolute dominance in the LL of Singapore's Chinatown while Chinese is ranked as the second frequently-used language appearing in the local LL. With regard to the LL features in top-down domain and bottom-up domain, it has been found that significant differences exist in terms of languages contained; monolingual, bilingual and multilingual compositions; code preference; forms of Chinese scripts as well as relationship between message content and language used. As to the functions of English and Chinese in the local LL, it has been found that in addition to the informational function fulfilled by these two languages, English is employed to maintain a global identity, to project a desired identity, and to promote local services and products whereas Chinese is used to fulfill cultural symbolic and aesthetics functions, as well as to maintain a Chinese minority ethnic identity.

The present study suggests that there is a language shift from Chinese to English underway on public signs in Chinatown. The study also suggests that the purpose of wide utilization of Chinese language in Chinatown is not merely for its cultural value, but more importantly, for the economic value of Chinese language. Lastly, the study highlights that the formation of such linguistic landscape in Singapore's Chinatown is a vivid reflection of Singapore government’s language policy.

Key words: Singapore; Chinatown; linguistic landscape; language policy