Virtual Linguistic Landscape: A Case Study of Chinese Border Universities' Websites in Yunnan

Meichun Xue, Zhuyujie Zou

School of Foreign Languages, Yunnan University, Kunming, China
Email: 1843719004@qq.com

Abstract

Linguistic landscape (LL) refers to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region. However, with the development of digital communications, the scope of LL has ranged from physical geography of the cityscape to virtual space. Yunnan as a bridgehead connecting China with South Asian and Southeast Asian countries, has an important strategic position. In order to explore the multilingualism in virtual space in China's Frontier, Yunnan, the author chooses several border universities' websites in Yunnan, comparing with universities' websites in Eastern China. This study examines the virtual linguistic landscape of border universities' websites. Findings reveal how do Chinese border universities construct their websites to present the "border university image". The study reveals that border universities construct their websites by adopting South Asian and Southeast Asian languages to empower and present themselves. Multilingualism in websites also demonstrates the decolonizing practice of border universities. The study can shed some light on providing implications for language planning and research on virtual linguistic landscape in Chinese education.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Virtual Linguistic Landscapes, Websites, Border Universities, Yunnan

1. Introduction

Linguistic landscape (LL) has been widely used since Landry and Bourhis posed

this term in 1997. It refers to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region [1]. It is embedded in the physical geography of the cityscape [2]. Blommaert and Maly called LL "an attempt to produce accurate and detailed inventories of urban multilingualism" [3]. However, with the development of digital communications, the scope of LL has ranged from physical geography of the cityscape to virtual space. The virtual linguistic landscape (VLL) describes the linguistic cyberspace just as the LL describes the linguistic cityscape [2]. Websites is an important virtual space to study virtual linguistic landscape, because it can be seen prevalent multilingual options and choices on it. University websites function as a public relation tool, which play important role in presenting university images and attracting more and more students and teachers. Therefore, university websites' language use is important. This study aims to explore virtual linguistic landscape of university websites in Yunnan. Yunnan, China's Southwest border province, has been discursively positioned as an ideal space for cultivating South Asian and Southeast Asian language learners for China's cross-cultural communication [4]. It is significant to examine how do Chinese border universities construct their websites to present "border university image" by language choice in their websites. Previous studies on websites are about shopping website [5] [6] and tourist website [7] [8], However, few studies focus on University website. Therefore, this study attempts to explore linguistic landscape of university website in Yunnan, which can provide pedagogical implications for language planning from meso level.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Studies on Linguistic Landscape at Home

After Landry and Bourhis posed the concept of "linguistic landscape" in 1997, more and more scholars at home and abroad have begun to pay attention to this topic. Although domestic language landscape research started late, it has developed rapidly and has achieved some research results in China.

Through sorting out the previous research results, it is found that scholars mainly focus on the city, street and other language landscape research. For example, Yanmei Han and Xiaodan Wu studies language policy, linguistic landscape and residents' perception of language use in Guangzhou, China, exploring the extent to which they are convergent with or divergent from one another [9]. Wu Xili and Zhan Ju examines the multilingual landscape of the African residential community in Guangzhou and found that Mandarin is the absolute dominating language whereas English is the most frequently used foreign language followed by Arabic and official signs and nonofficial signs display distinct differences in terms of code choices [10]. Su Jie focuses on the relationship between the language power embodied in the bottom-up signs and the culture power in Shanghai's language ecosystem [11]. Moreover, the linguistic circle has paid more and more attention to the study of campus language landscape. Using digital devices, scholars collect, classify, observe, analyze, synthesize the landscape features of such entities, and propose corrective measures for existing problems

such as language standardization. For instance, Chen explored Xinjiang Campus landscape and gave some advice [12]. Zhang also investigated the campus landscape [13]. However, these researches mainly focus on the panoramic view of languages on signs in a given territory. Though there is a trend from linguistic landscape to virtual linguistic landscape, for example, Mao and Ren explored linguistic landscapes on the website of Yi Wu Wholesale Market [5]. Dai, Wang and Zou focus on University website in the north of China [14]. Shen and Li also study university official website, they take Dalian Colleges and Universities as examples [15]. But there still lack of research on virtual landscape. Research on university websites mainly analyze the website character and give advice, and focus on north and eastern of China. Few study pay attention to the border universities in southwest of China and to the relation between language choice and ideology. Therefore, this study attempts to explore linguistic landscape of university website in Yunnan, which can provide pedagogical implications for language planning from meso level.

2.2. Previous Studies on Linguistic Landscape Abroad

Overseas research on linguistic landscape started earlier and the research results are more abundant. Most studies mainly focus on multicultural characters or interactions between social media and individuals. LL research has been conducted in Jerusalem [16], Montreal [1], Bangkok [17], and Netherlands [18], all of which are recognized for their multilingual and multicultural characters. Gradually, researches on linguistic landscape transfer from physical linguistic landscape (LL) to virtual linguistic landscape (VLL). Analogous to the physical LL, the virtual LL serves to delineate the linguistic community and to mark language status in expressed power relations among the coexisting linguistic choices in the cyberspace community [2]. Blackwood and Han hold that social media sites are generally seen as public places where users constantly represent themselves and negotiate identities through interactions with other peoplein their network [19] [20]. Xiaofang Yao explores metrolingualism in online linguistic landscapes, examines how participants in this online space draw upon a complex array of semiotic resources from spatial repertoires to constantly negotiate their self-presentation and manage the effects of context collapse [21]. However, few studies pay attention to university websites. The official website of the university is the information window, image window and internal working platform of the campus. The construction of language landscape in university website plays an important role in constructing the image of the university and improving the soft power of the university. Therefore, this study attempts to explore how the universities in Yunnan construct their websites and how do they present their image in website.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Virtual Linguistic Landscape

VLL is an extension of the physical public spheres of language use. Similar to

physical LL, VLL indexes boundaries, language hierarchies, and power relations "among the coexisting linguistic choices" in language communities [2]. VLL conveys "symbolic messages as to the legitimacy, relevance, priority and standards of languages" as well as the communities represented [22]. However, VLL has its distinguishing characteristics because of the way the monologic web is organized and managed. First, VLL experiences more frequent content updates than LL, more so in dialogic Web 2.0 than monologic Web 1.0 [2]. Also, in the physical LL, individuals interact with the language content within delineated physical boundaries, but VLL is delocalized [2], making it accessible to anyone with internet connection. Lastly, the digital innovative possibilities allow VLL to include new ways of interactions and language uses within digital spaces although the content is controlled by those who hold the ownership to design VLL and make decisions about the language(s) of communication in Web 1.0 platforms [2].

3.2. Language Ideologies in Linguistic Landscape

Language is inherently ideological. Rumsey (in [23]) defines language ideologies as "shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world." Woolard sees language ideology as encompassing "cultural conceptions not only of language and language variation, but of the nature and purpose of communication, and of communicative behavior as an enactment of a collective order" [23]. Language ideologies find expression in human behavior and social practice, influencing not just communication at the micro-level but also shaping culture as a whole [24]. Language actions and choices are inevitably constrained by ideological or structural (class) factors related to power, hegemony, and dominance [25] [26]. Ingrid Piller in her book Intercultural Communication argues that language ideology is implicit in practice and the language ideologies of a society find expression in the linguistic landscape [27]. For example, we can analyze the languages used in a collection of images of official signage (for example, street signs, directions, public warnings, council notices) and thinking which language or languages are valorized and which languages remain invisible. The language ideologies are actually embodied in linguistic landscape.

4. Methodology

4.1. Border Universities Websites

At present, 32 universities, which are mainly in North China and southwest China, have offered majors in south Asian and southeast Asian language, and among them, Yunnan has the largest number of universities offering south Asian and southeast Asian language [28]. Yunnan has various languages resources of neighboring countries and in light of favorable geographical advantages it has become a bridgehead connecting South and Southeast Asia. In order to explore language ideology and language practice of virtual space in China's frontier, Yunnan, the author chooses four border universities' websites in Yun-

nan to examines the virtual linguistic landscape of border universities websites and see how do Chinese border universities construct their websites to present "border university image", comparing with the two universities websites in eastern China.

Research Websites

The six websites chosen are shown in the following Table 1, and they are divided according to the city where the university is located and also the type of university.

4.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

This study takes the linguistic landscape of websites of four universities in Yunnan, comparing with two universities' websites in Eastern China. This study examines the distribution characteristics of linguistic landscape on university websites through quantitative and qualitative approach. This article mainly uses the university website screenshot analysis, concretely speaking, transforms the home page and the dropdown menu page text into the corpus. In addition, this paper also adopts pictures, color and other information into the linguistic landscape category.

Research Questions

1) What are differences of language choice in university websites between universities at China's frontier and universities in eastern China?

2) How do language ideologies embodied in website landscape?

3) How do universities in Yunnan construct their websites to present "border university image"?

5. Findings

5.1. Language Imperialism in Universities Websites

The lingua franca of the universities websites is English, as can be seen in Table 2. According to Ingrid Piller, she draws on de Swaan's global-language system pyramid (see Figure 1) to demonstrate that there exists linguistic hierarchy of world languages. The languages at the bottom of the pyramid, which account for an estimated 98% of all the 5000 to 6000 languages in the world, while the apex of the pyramid is occupied by one single language, English, which de Swaan describes as "hyper-central language" [29]. From this global-language system pyramid, it can be seen that LOTE like Myanmar, Thai, Vietnamese are peripheral languages. English as global language has great impact on education policies and practice [30], linguistics imperialism became a structure force urging people to learn English. Based on the context of English as hyper-central language, universities websites place English at first, then other languages follow behind.

From September 2001, English was introduced as a compulsory subject in Grade 3 in all elementary schools that have suitably qualified teachers. This represents a lowering of the age of compulsory instruction from 11 to 9. In primary school, there are generally two or three 40-minute lessons a week. In
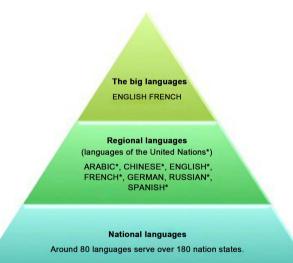
Table 1. Six universities' information.

Universities	Types of Universities	Location
A	Comprehensive university	Yunnan
B	Normal university	Yunnan
C	Financial university	Yunnan
D	Comprehensive university	Yunnan
E	Comprehensive university	Jiangsu
F	Comprehensive university	Zhejiang

Table 2. Language choices of university websites.

Universities	Languages in websites
A	English
B	English, Japanese, Myanmar, Thai, Vietnamese
C	English, Vietnamese, Thai
D	English, French, Vietnamese, Thai, Lao, Myanmar, Cambodian, Indonesian
E	English
F	English, Russian, Deutsch

Figure 1. Global-language system pyramid.

secondary school, there are either five or six 45-minute lessons. The impact of English as a global language has been considerable. Entry requirements to university, promotional prospects in the workplace, curricula, and published materials have all been affected.

According Lu & Shen, within the linguistic market, different values are attached to different linguistic varieties [31], thus forming linguistic capital (which, in this case, refers to proficiency in specific language(s) as an embodied form of cultural capital) with different 'prices' [32]. Considering its longstanding dominance in the academic and educational domains [33] [34], English has been assigned a high value and is thus situated in a central position within the market, while the relative shortage of LOTE (language other than English)-related and LOTE-based studies and LOTE education resources, especially for those LOTEs with fewer speakers and lower assigned values, indicates the peripheral positions of LOTEs within the market. So, it can be seen the language imperialism in universities websites from the languages choice.

5.2. Semiotic Resources of South Asian and Southeast Asian Languages as Empowerment

Yunnan province in China's southwest shares over 4000 kilometers of borderline with Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. Because of its geopolitical advantage, Yunnan is constructed as a window linking China to South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. In education, for instance, over 80% of international students in Yunnan are from Southeast Asia and South Asia [35]. Therefore, universities in Yunnan establish Southeast Asian languages such as Thai, Burmese, Vietnamese, and Laotian, rather than using English as the only foreign subject. In the websites of Yunnan Universities, although English is placed at first because of the global-language system and language imperialism, languages other than English like Vietnamese, Thai, Myanmar follow behind as empowerment of local linguistic resources to challenge English in the borderlands (see Figure 2). Universities make use of linguistic resources to present their "border university image" and empower themselves in China's frontier.

Li and Lv in the article "*Foreign language learning for minority empowerment*?" emphasize the empowerment of foreign language learning in China's frontier [35]. Minority students learn Burmese as extension of family capital, and learn Thai for additive identities. Southeast Asian languages like Burmese and Thai empower minority students' upward mobility in the borderlands. In Yunnan universities, such stories of South Asian and Southeast Asian learner are a lot. Websites post these stories to present their successful teaching and important role in cultivate LOTE talents (see Figure 3).

Pictures of LOTE students in universities websites are a kind of semiotic resources as empowerment. In the picture, students dress South Asian and Southeast Asian countries' costume and take part in activities smiley (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). Their costumes and positive emotions as a semiotic resources to present good image of border university.

Figure 2. Languages in websites of University D.

Figure 3. Sinhalese majors' activities in University D.

Figure 4. The website of University C.

Figure 5. Laos students sing in the ceremony of China-Laos railway.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the virtual linguistic landscape of Yunnan universities websites by analyzing language choices and semiotic resources in websites. From the aspect of language choices, though English as the top language in global-language system pyramid has great impact on education policies and practice, and though it continues to grow in online popularity, other languages are catching up. Opportunities for multiple language access and exchange are increasing thanks to multilingual pages, and though these mechanisms tend to represent selected major world languages, they do challenge the cybercolonial force of English. Yunnan universities websites adopt South Asian and Southeast Asian languages as an empowerment to construct their websites. It can be seen language ideologies of universities in China's frontier. Adopting South Asian and Southeast Asian languages in websites to emphasize their important role in cultivate LOTE talents in border and these multilingual in their websites actually is a decolonizing practice to against English imperialism. From the aspect of semiotic resources, websites highlight pictures of LOTE students. Pictures of LOTE students accounts for a large proportion in universities websites. And in these pictures, students' costume and positive emotions can be semiotics representing the empowerment of South Asian and Southeast Asian languages learning. These two aspects can reveal how do Chinese border universities construct their websites to present "border university image". The study reveals that border universities construct their websites by adopting South Asian and Southeast Asian languages to empower and present themselves. Multilingualism in websites also demonstrates

the decolonizing practice of border universities. The study can shed some light on providing implications for language planning and research on virtual linguistic landscape in Chinese education.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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