Power, Affect, and Identity in the Linguistic Landscape

Chinese Communities in Australia and Beyond

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Chapter 2

Theoretical perspectives on the linguistic landscape

Geosemiotics, sociolinguistics of globalisation, and metrolingualism

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2 Theoretical perspectives on the linguistic landscape

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Linguistic landscape research has gained prominence alongside the broader processes of globalisation. The increased mobility of people has facilitated the movement of languages, histories, cultures, and social beliefs across regional and national borders (Blommaert, 2013). When these diverse resources encounter the sociolinguistic norms of established communities in the host society, negotiations of conflicting identities and ideologies take place (Nambu & Ono, 2024). These negotiations give rise to emergent sociolinguistic practices, which manifest in the physical environment as diverse linguistic landscapes. Urban centres, globalised cities, and areas of volatility—such as sites of street protests—naturally serve as fertile grounds for linguistic landscape studies. These spaces are filled with social communicative actions that attract the attention of researchers in sociolinguistics, social semiotics, language policy, and other fields.

The scope of linguistic landscape is constantly expanding, which has sparked debates and criticisms regarding its theoretical and methodological focus. In response to these ambiguities, this chapter explores its definition, methodology, and theoretical foundations. By revisiting the seminal works of Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon, Jan Blommaert, and Alastair Pennycook, I argue that linguistic landscape research aligns closely with the posthumanist turn in the broader field of applied linguistics. This development shifts our focus from a human-centric, cognition-based approach to language and communication to one that acknowledges the materiality of language and physical objects as agents of meaning. The linguistic landscape therefore offers a unique lens through which to examine how social actions and discourse practices are materialised and inscribed in public spaces.

Defining the scope

Observing that language use can geographically demarcate the boundaries of ethnolinguistic communities, Landry and Bourhis (1997) propose that ‘the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings in each territory, region, or urban agglomeration’ collectively constitute the linguistic landscape (p. 25). However, as Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) note, the immediate problem arising from

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this definition is that the presence of linguistic communities may not necessarily correspond with the languages used in the public space. Language choices on signage may be based on the ideology of individual sign writers, who might

> write a sign in a language you know, prefer to write a sign in a language which can be read by the people you expect to read it, and prefer to write a sign in your own language or in a language you wish to be identified with.
>
> (Spolsky, 2009, p. 33)

Other factors that might exert an influence on the visibility of languages include the mandate of official language policy, the need for satisfying consumers, and the urge for asserting individuality or collective identity (Ben-Rafael & Ben-Rafael, 2015). As a result, the linguistic landscape represents a constructed reality and a confluence of individual, corporate and public actions, rather than the actual demographic composition in the public space.

The first attempt to expand the scope of linguistic landscape focuses on incorporating more varied categories of signage into analysis. For example, Backhaus (2007) argues for a more inclusive view of linguistic landscape as being ‘any piece of written text within a spatially definable frame’ (p. 66). The ‘unit of analysis’, according to his definition, extends from stationary signs to temporary signs such as handwritten stickers, informational tags of trees, printed T-shirts, and posters on moving vehicles. As the field continues to evolve, researchers increasingly recognise the significance of different modalities such as images, sounds, and words in meaning-making. As Shohamy and Waksman (2009) note, the linguistic landscape not only includes multilingual written texts, but also ‘verbal texts, images, objects, placement in time and space as well as human beings’ (p. 314). Language is ‘multimodal’ as it contains not only linguistic clues, but also layout, typography, and colour. Each of these elements is defined as a semiotic mode, with distinctive affordances or potentials to express certain meanings; these modes together constitute an integrated semiotic resource that is conceived socially and culturally meaningful (Kress, 2015). Based on these visual semiotic properties, Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) suggest that ‘semiotic landscape’ be adopted in place of ‘linguistic landscape’ to denote the focus on the range of semiotic affordances inherent in the spatial environment.

Among these semiotic modes, most attention has been paid to inscription, typography, and material objects as meaning-making resources. The materiality and inscription of building signs, for example, may help create an aspirational identity of luxury, elitism, and power (Li & Yang, 2023). As Jaworski and Yeung (2010) note, real estate developers can certainly take advantage of building signs to promote residential blocks as an idealised place for consumers pursuing ‘immediate happiness and self-fulfilment’ (p. 178). Even some seemingly dismissible non-linguistic elements, including the case of letters, punctuation marks, and serif forms, are rich in semiotic potential. In many cultures, stone and metal signs are perceived to convey permanence and quality, whereas handwritten and printed signs represent temporariness and novelty (Cook, 2015). The typography,

orthography, and script of English may as well be an idealist expression of fashion and internationalisation (Zhang & Chan, 2017); the choice between simplified and traditional scripts of Chinese might indicate differing political ideologies and national affiliations (Su & Chun, 2021); and the employment of creative, playful, and subversive polyscriptal practices would entail power relations among scripts (Li & Zhu, 2019). Languages, therefore, should be interpreted textually and visually in terms of their sociocultural situatedness.

The third wave of efforts to expand the scope of the linguistic landscape emphasises the sensory, affective, and evocative potential of the material environment, leading to the creation of new terms such as 'bodyscape', 'smellscape', and 'memoryscape', among others. Milani and Levon (2016) highlight how gender division structures the social space. This gendered order is underlined by enduring beliefs about the roles of the two gender categories and is embodied by the 'bodyscape', that is, human bodies appearing in sexed signs found across various sites and banal objects, such as newsstands, T-shirts, and coffee shops. In addition, smell serves as a significant means for us to establish the connection between culture and space, despite being one of the less emphasised senses in human life (see also Weldemichael et al., 2019 for a discussion of taste). Our olfactory sense is culturally sensitive and can help us decode the aromas of spices, the smells of durian, and the scents of herbs in the 'smellscape' of multicultural neighbourhoods (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015). Smells bring people, objects, and activities together in spaces where social orders and cultural values are enacted through olfactory experiences.

The 'memoryscape', consisting of material signs such as monuments, plaques, and place names, can evoke a collective memory of imagined communities. As Moore (2019) suggests, these landmarks are often manipulated 'as a tool of nation building and power legitimation' (p. 248), making salient visual hierarchies, social positions, and political claims. Place names are inherently tied to memory, as they serve as a remembrance of past events or figures. For example, tattooed symbols and linguistic names written in Japanese *kanji* evoke an idealised memory of localness and authentic identity (Hiramoto, 2015); additionally, scripts, objects, and camera angles can activate memory alongside other affective emotions such as mourning, guilt, and shame, which are imbricated with territorialisation and diaspora identification (Milani et al., 2019). More importantly, those who are conferred the authority to name sites may impose officially sanctioned memories by specific languages. Collective memory thus becomes a resource at the disposal of sign makers, who may or may not choose to activate 'a memorialisation of the language' as part of a heritage experience for consumption (Vigers, 2013, p. 175). Consequently, the nostalgic appeal of lost patterns of everyday life has been a powerful driver of cultural tourism, offering tourists packaged experiences of pristine natural landscapes and more authentic ways of life (Leone, 2015; Lyons & Karimzad, 2019).

Most recently, the scope of the linguistic landscape has been extended to include online digital spaces and social media platforms. The Web 2.0 era ushered in a new public domain, within which millions of users generate vast amounts of communication data daily, mostly multimodal in nature (Blommaert, 2019). The advent of interactive social media has opened a range of social spaces to modern individuals

and brought about a new repertoire of multilingual and multimodal communicative resources (Teng & Chan, 2022). In addition, as we navigate the digitalised society, conflicting ideologies and translingual practices in the virtual space increasingly interact with discourses in the physical place, leading to the circulation of languages, cultures, and identities across online-offline borders. Under this context, it is unrealistic to confine linguistic landscape analysis to physical signs alone. Instead, a more fruitful approach would be to embrace publicly displayed language items in the online arena, where new modes of communication are prevalent in modern times (Kallen et al., 2020). This new development also calls for a re-assessment of data collection methods for online linguistic landscape analysis which could draw inspirations from social media and communication studies.

Overall, the scope of linguistic landscape remains controversial. The static and immobile perspective is being replaced by a more dynamic and ethnographic view of signs. The term 'linguistic' is gradually giving way to 'semiotic' to account for the multimodal and semiotic aspects of discourses (Thurlow, 2019). The context of linguistic landscape is shifting from offline, terrestrial spaces to online, digital platforms. These efforts to define and redefine the linguistic landscape are driven by the motivation of describing and identifying the intentions, ideologies, and decisions of sign makers through the visibility of languages and semiotic resources in the public domain (Gorter & Cenoz, 2015). Linguistic landscape is intriguing because it offers numerous possibilities for interdisciplinary research. However, as we push the boundaries of this field, it is crucial to critically evaluate the potential implications of an expanded linguistic landscape for major stakeholders who hold political, educational, social, and commercial interests in sign-making.

Methodological evolution

There has been an ongoing discussion about the use of different methodologies in empirical linguistic landscape research. Quantitative analysis dominated pre-2009 studies. However, this approach was later complemented by qualitative methods, including critical genre and narrative analysis (Wetzel, 2010; Järlehed, 2017), ethnography (Ferguson & Sidorova, 2018; Liu, 2023), and multimodal analysis (Zhang & Chan, 2017; Motschenbacher, 2023). This section presents a review of current methodological trends in the field of linguistic landscape. It suggests that a way forward for linguistic landscape research is to draw on diverse frameworks and approaches to address the social, cultural, historical, and political issues that emerge in public spaces.

Digital camera is the primary tool used by linguistic landscapers to capture images of public signs. This method generates a dataset consisting of photographs of signage, which can be subsequently analysed to reveal the multilingual profiles of the survey site. By comparing the frequency counts of languages with the demographics of the neighbourhood, researchers can make extrapolations about the ethnolinguistic vitality of various communities based on the visibility of their languages in that area (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). An immediate issue with counting signs, however, is the ambiguity of the *unit of analysis*. As signs often appear in

aggregates and layered upon each other, it is challenging to define what constitutes an individual sign. In addition, Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) propose the distinction between 'top-down' (official) and 'bottom-up' (unofficial) signs. This dichotomy provides a basic framework for understanding the interactions between language policies and grassroots practices, although inconsistencies remain regarding the classification of signs into smaller categories or genres.

The dispute over the unit of analysis was addressed by Backhaus (2007), who proposed that 'any piece of written text' situated in the public space should be considered a sign (p. 66). His analytical framework includes nine categories: (1) language contained, (2) language combinations (such as using English, Vietnamese, and Chinese on a multilingual poster), (3) top-down and bottom-up signs, (4) geographic distribution, (5) code preference (e.g., English would be considered as the preferred language code if it appears first in the visual hierarchy with the largest font size and central positioning), (6) part writing (e.g., a multilingual sign might contain Japanese and its English translation, but the translation is partial and does not fully correspond with the Japanese text), (7) visibility (whether the display of texts in two or more languages is within one sign—visible multilingualism, or within separate signs—invisible multilingualism), (8) idiosyncrasies (deviations from standard language use), and (9) layering (coexistence of older and newer versions of a given sign). This comprehensive typology of multilingual signs preceded a wave of studies dedicated to mapping multilingual phenomena in globalised cities (e.g., Lai, 2013; Morlan & Byrne, 2023; Karpava, 2024).

Relying solely on frequency counts has been widely criticised as being a simplistic and deterministic approach (Barni & Bagna, 2015). Some researchers have proposed alternative approaches to enhance the validity of quantitative analysis. Amos (2016) introduces a comprehensive system for categorising signs in terms of languages contained, overlapping of texts, communicative function, spatial position of the sign, materials used to produce the sign, author of the sign, type of place where the sign is displayed, and relevant discourses surrounding the sign. He argues that the unit of analysis should be defined by the pragmatic function of the written text, as this approach 'permits a nuanced understanding of the practices and actions' that construct the space (p. 10). Another critical point raised is that the survey area should not be limited by pre-designed sampling criteria, but rather determined based on emerging data or visible variation of signage in the linguistic landscape. This approach opens up discussions on how languages, as visible resources, can be used to interrogate the spatial boundaries of ethnic communities.

Another comprehensive quantitative method was reported by Soukup (2016) who investigates language choice on written signs in the linguistic landscape of Vienna from a variationist sociolinguistics perspective. This holistic approach to data collection involves photographing all visible signs in the surveyed areas, excluding handwritten texts, interior linguistic landscapes, non-stationary objects, and non-text-based signs. According to Soukup (2020, p. 53), the 'hypothesis-driven stratified sampling' method was informed by the variationist technique for survey area selection, understood as a two-step process: (1) researchers propose hypotheses about which social factors are correlated with the choice of English on public

signs (e.g., the use of English is correlated with the proportion of young residents—age factor, the extent of multilingualism in the neighbourhood—multilingualism factor, and international business and global consumerism—tourism factor); (2) researchers select pairs of streets in Vienna that reflect these demographic variables and levels of commercial activity, and then use the collected data to test their hypotheses. The benefits of this quantifying approach lie in its comprehensiveness and statistical granularity. It leads us to a more rigorous sampling technique that avoids research bias towards sign density and salience.

Thus far, the consensus is that the quantitative approach allows for comparative evaluations across multiple datasets. However, to avoid impressionistic accounts of language use and to gain a more nuanced understanding of sociolinguistic practices in the public space, especially regarding untraditional signs often treated as noise data in quantitative research—qualitative and ethnographic methods are necessary. This shift is recognised as the ‘qualitative turn’ in the field of linguistic landscape (Woldemariam & Lanza, 2015, p. 177). Specifically, the types of qualitative analysis often depend on the disciplinary traditions of researchers. For instance, narrative analysis from literary studies can be used to examine reference and indexicality, shifts in points of view, ways to convey points of view, and voice in the ‘mini narratives’ of signs (Wetzel, 2010, p. 326). Motive analysis, drawn from rhetorical criticism, can analyse students’ descriptions of multilingual events in terms of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose (Rowland, 2015). Frame analysis, a metaphor derived from photography, can be used to explore the visible and invisible cultural structures that shape how textual and visual elements should be interpreted (Zhao, 2021).

The primary aim of ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis, as Blommaert and Huang (2013) note, is to provide a comprehensive account of the historical, political, social, and economic environment in which the signs are situated, as well as the social actors with whom the signs interact. Despite this shared aim, ethnographic investigations of the linguistic landscape take various forms. Stroud and Mpendukana (2009), for example, employ a material ethnography to explore how the socioeconomic status of physical space can be differentiated by the materials and technologies in sign production. Their study reveals several factors driving linguistic change in a South African town: (1) increased social, economic, and physical mobility of people, (2) new perceptions of space as a site of abundant semiotic practices constrained by material means of production, and (3) an aspiration towards consumerism and stylistic self-expression. This material orientation was continued by Stroud and Jegels (2014), which explores the importance of locality as people move under the directions of signs, and the macro-discourses that pre-determine engagement with space. The study highlights that signs might function as a materialised order which organises local actions.

More recently, videography has been added to ethnographers’ data collection toolkit, complementing conventional approaches such as participant observation and interviews. Hult (2014) employs video ethnography to collect visual data on the drive along San Antonio highway in the United States, as still photography is incompatible with the fast-moving nature of the vehicular system. The study

provides methodological inspiration for future research aiming to capture mobile texts (such as texts on T-shirts and tote bags), an under-explored genre in traditional linguistic landscape research (but see Jaworski & Lou, 2021). Troyer and Szabó (2017) consider videography as a visual representation of the linguistic landscape. They suggest that videography could capture real-time participant interactions during interviews and walking tours, which can 'highlight the embodied and situated nature of photography-in-the-LL' (p. 61). In a related paper, Szabó and Troyer (2017) introduce the notion of 'inclusive ethnographies' to describe this type of data collection which involves photographing and video recording interactions with research participants. Their investigation of multilingualism in a Hungarian school shows that video data can enrich interpretations of fieldwork encounters.

In the choice of methods, Blackwood (2015) advocates a more eclectic 'symbiotic approach' that combines the panoramic view of quantitative analysis with the nuanced insights of qualitative analysis. This mixed-methods approach has been adopted in the existing literature (e.g., Lam & Graddol, 2017; Yao & Gruba, 2020; Robinson-Jones, 2024) and is likely to gain further popularity. The integration of various perspectives and analytical tools provides different possibilities for understanding and interpreting sociolinguistic practices in the landscape (Shohamy & Waksman, 2009). The ongoing methodological evolution suggests that the critical consideration is not the supremacy of one approach over another, but rather which method is best suited to the aim and scope of a linguistic landscape study.

Theoretical perspectives

Linguistic landscape research faces the challenge of developing a comprehensive theory that captures the intricate ways language uses shape and are shaped by space. Some pressing questions include: how can various theories and concepts be applied to address local concerns in diverse linguistic landscapes? How can researchers move beyond descriptive analyses of the linguistic landscape to achieve a nuanced understanding of pertinent sociolinguistic concerns such as power, affect, and identity? Most importantly, what is unique about a linguistic landscape study of communicative practices that makes it a distinctive field of inquiry? This section discusses the theoretical perspectives on linguistic landscape as an attempt to establish a conceptual framework for the book.

Geosemiotics: Discourses in place

Scollon and Scollon (2003) developed a comprehensive theory of geosemiotics, also known as discourses in place. Geosemiotics is arguably the most well-received theory in existing linguistic landscape literature. From a spatial and material perspective, geosemiotics focuses on the rules, meaning potentials, and constraints of a place to uncover the meaning of public artefacts (Lou, 2017). Geosemiotic theory is informed by three traditions in linguistic and semiotic studies: (1) linguistic anthropology which draws on the concept of interaction order from conversation analysis to theorise social arrangements among people through interpersonal

distance; (2) social semiotics which is dedicated to the analysis of materiality and semiotic resources involved in sign-making; and (3) place semiotics which examines the signs by situating them in time and space (see also Jewitt et al., 2016 for a review of semiotic approaches).

Geosemiotics presupposes an ethnographic perspective on public signs by considering the histories of people, sign-making practices, and places. As such, empirical data required for a geosemiotic analysis often include snapshots of signs, field investigations, and interviews (e.g., Lee & Lou, 2019; Feddersen et al., 2024). The first component of geosemiotics is the interaction order, which involves linguistic landscape participants' (a) sense of time, (b) perceptual spaces, (c) interpersonal distance, and (d) personal front. To illustrate, a sense of time or duration is subject to the urgency of the matter and the number of activities performed at a time; perceptual spaces refer to the visual, auditory, olfactory, thermal, and tactile space; interpersonal distances can be intimate, personal, social, or public, depending on the number of inches between interlocutors; personal fronts mean the external displays of a person in the presence of others, who carefully organises involvement by evaluating social order at play. This analysis emphasises the rules and norms in social interaction and how these are enacted through the visible relationship between people and signs.

Figure 2.1 illustrates the enactment of interaction order. It shows how each human sense demarcates a perceptual space where the sign is imbued with meanings. The massage sign serves two purposes: (1) it provides a visual orientation to the shop, and (2) it invites us to associate intimate touching with a soothing feeling in the tactile space. The picture features a mono-focal activity—the slow movement of fingers and the still bodily position indicate a lack of urgency and the slow passage of time. Skin touching suggests an intimate interpersonal distance between the imaginary masseuse and the assumed customer, with the masseuse setting up a room with timber floor and linen, and the customer performing her social role through the conventionalised, downward-facing posture and half-naked body covered by a towel. These material aspects and objects in the surroundings are brought together to present personal fronts in the massage service encounter.

The second element of geosemiotics takes semiotic signs as its focus, attending to (a) elements represented in the sign, (b) truth value of the representation, (c) compositional layout of signs, and (d) interactive participants. Elements within pictures can be represented as a narrative of unfolding actions and processes connected through vectors, such as eye gaze or direction of movement (e.g., Tan et al., 2018), or as conceptual categories such as diagrams, if there is no vectorial relationship. In considering truth values or the visual modality, factors including colour saturation, depth of field, illumination, and brightness could indicate truthfulness of the image, or how accurately the image is reflective of reality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). For naturalistic representation in Western aesthetics, ideal and given information is often located in the upper, left positions whereas real and new information is in the lower, right portions (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Social distance between represented elements within signs and their viewers may be indicated by the size of the image within the picture frame; the larger the image, the closer the perceived social

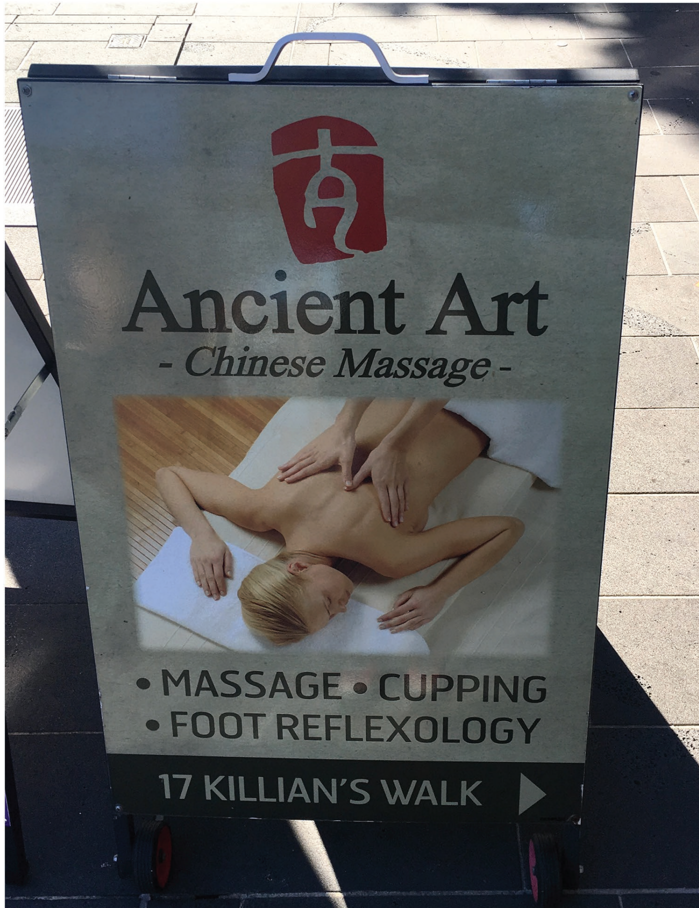

Figure 2.1 Chinese massage shop sign.

distance (see also Coupland & Garrett, 2010). Low-angle and high-angle shots can suggest power and involvement relationships by positioning the audience either below or above the eye level of the depicted participants within the picture (e.g., Milani et al., 2019).

To illustrate, Figure 2.2 features two Asian girls. Although they have no direct eye contact, their bodily positions indicate a vector of movement towards each other, suggesting a narrative relationship where the direction of motion produces the narrative vector from one girl to the other (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Based on the assumption in Western aesthetics that naturalist representation is the most faithful to reality, this sign might be classified as having low modality or truthfulness since its represented elements, colour saturation, and brightness appear to have been carefully crafted and curated. The shop name 'Asian Mix' occupies the centre, whereas the mobile SIM advertisement is polarised to the left, right, and bottom

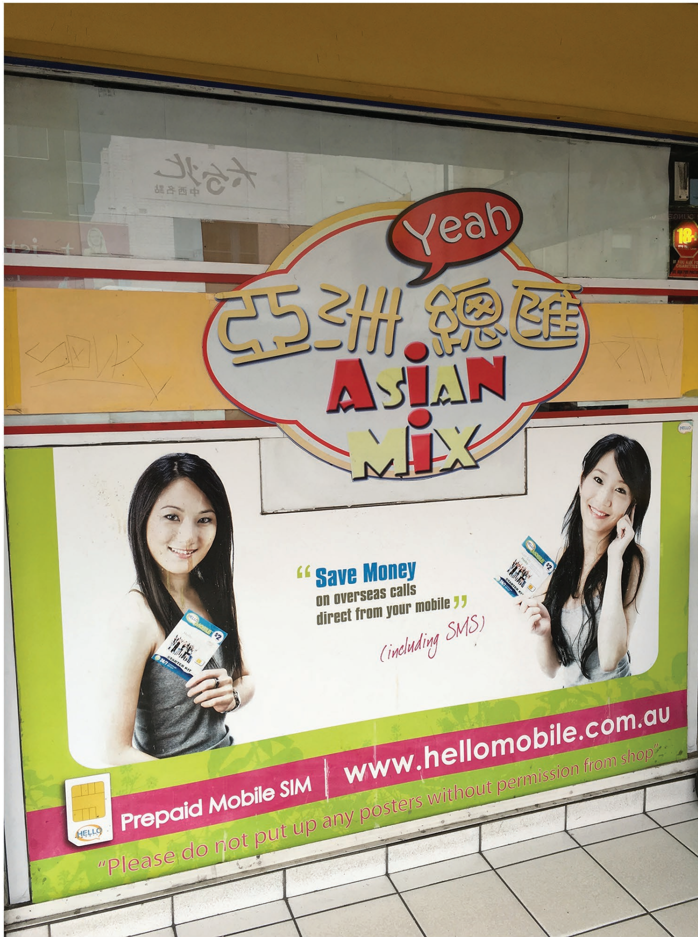

Figure 2.2 Asian Mix shop sign.

positions. This compositional layout clearly emphasises the shop name over other information. More interestingly, the two girls in the picture 'not only exhibit a narrative or conceptual relationship among themselves, but they also establish relations with viewers of the image' (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 96). Their direct gaze into the viewers' eyes represents an invitation for social interaction, and the half-body shot resembles the view scope of interactants when they are within the social space of these two girls.

Most importantly, the third component of geosemiotics pays attention to place semiotics, or how signs make meaning due to their placement in the material world. Scollon and Scollon (2003) delineate four analytical perspectives, including (a) code preference, (b) inscription, (c) emplacement, and (d) discourses in time and space, to examine the significance of place in signifying social meanings. They

suggest that preferences for language codes can be inferred from the relative size and position of languages on signs. Inscription choices related to fonts (typefaces, romanisation, and calligraphy), material, layering, and state changes are suggestive of underlying linguistic ideologies. For example, simplified and traditional character systems of the Chinese language are tied with national affiliation, political stance, and cultural inheritance (Curtin, 2015; Sheng & Buchanan, 2022); materials convey meanings about permanency, temporality and quality through aspects such as inscription medium, manufacturing technology, and installation freshness (Cook, 2015; Alsaif & Starks, 2019); layering through add-on signs implies newness and temporality (Vuorsola, 2020), while state changes of fluorescent signs or lightboxes may signal directives for action (Zhang et al., 2024).

Based on where signs are 'emplaced' in the physical environment, we can distinguish among decontextualised, transgressive, and situated signs (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Decontextualised signs would appear in the same form regardless of context. Examples include icons resembling the object, indexes pointing to or attached to an object, and symbols conventionally associated with an artefact (Jaworski & Yeung, 2010). Transgressive signs appear in unexpected or illegitimate places, such as doodle on public transport vehicles. Situated signs are those whose meanings can be inferred based on their emplacement, including regulatory signs and store names. Geosemiotics also posits that spaces are dissected by public signs in the frontstage and private signs in the backstage. The places where signs are situated are filled with prevalent discourses that might be regulatory (relating to vehicle traffic, pedestrian traffic, and public notices), infrastructural (relating to public functional notices and public labels), commercial (such as advertising), and transgressive (such as graffiti) (see also Thurlow, 2019).

Figure 2.3 shows a traffic sign at a crossroads. From the lens of place semiotics, this sign indicates a preference for the English language code, given the absence of other languages. Its varied inscription choices include handwriting in capital letters layered upon a standard road sign made of durable materials. The almost invisible square shape of white paint in the middle suggests that the no-stop sign was created on top of a previous sign that was recently wiped out. These add-ons highlight the newness of the permanent sign and its incongruence with the original semiotic design. This no-stop sign is both decontextualised (as a standardised traffic sign in Australia) and situated (as it is emplaced alongside a narrow thoroughfare). Unauthorised scribbles on the road sign, despite being random and playful, represent a transgression of public order. The assemblage of the no-stop sign, no-right turn sign, and pedestrian traffic light is situated in the public domain and is a constituent of the regulatory discourse. The two static signs regulate vehicular traffic by prohibiting certain directional movements of vehicles, whereas the traffic light, with its changing states from green walking man to a red waiting man, represents the regulatory discourse of pedestrian traffic.

As can be seen, signs can enact social actions. Once they are placed in the environment, an intertextual reference between signs, known as the dialogicality of signs, is established (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). The selection of a subset of signs by any

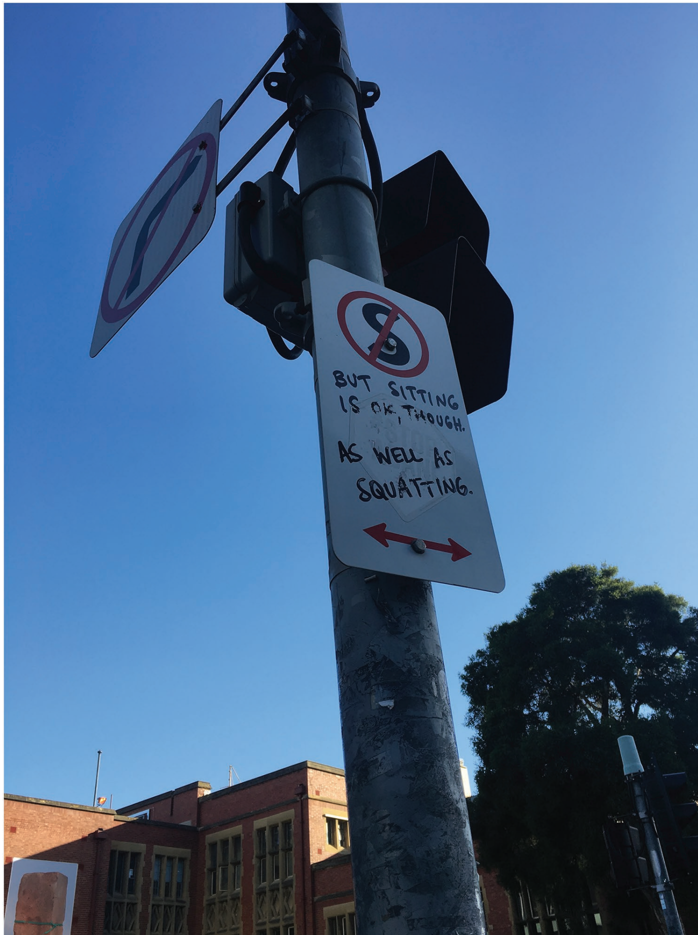

Figure 2.3 Traffic sign at a crossroads.

social interactants helps distinguish the foregrounded meanings and backgrounded context. That said, geosemiotics has been revised to suit different sociocultural contexts. For example, Lou (2017) proposes a modified geosemiotic framework by recategorising the material aspects of semiotic signs from place semiotics to visual semiotics, reclassifying perceptual spaces into place semiotics, and reintroducing the five senses of humans in contact with spaces. This study prioritises the focus on the perceptual, physical, and discursive aspects of place semiotics. Overall, geosemiotics represents a rich ethnographic analysis of how spatial and material resources help construct the historicity of place (Lee & Lou, 2019). Its three systems—interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics—serve as a useful heuristic for understanding the materiality and indexicality of signs within the public domain.

Sociolinguistics of globalisation: Migrant communities

Deeper and wider processes of globalisation have contributed to increased mobility in society. A growing number of immigration centres have formed, hosting people with diverse origins, educational backgrounds, migration channels, social networks, and ethnolinguistic identities (Blommaert, 2010). The dynamic interplay of these variables in public areas creates a complex, unpredictable, and 'superdiverse' social environment unknown to our previous experience (Arnaut et al., 2016). New migrants establish local infrastructural facilities while maintaining networks with their countries of origin. Therefore, globalised neighbourhoods are both local and translocal, real and virtual (Blommaert, 2010). This rapid social change and stratification of immigrant spaces also impact the development of multilingual repertoires, patterns of language use, and mechanisms of language variation (Maly, 2016). Drawing on exemplar signs from Melbourne, a multicultural and globalised city, this section discusses how the sociolinguistics of globalisation theoretically informs our understanding of language and space.

Globalised neighbourhoods are characterised by a wide array of linguistic and semiotic resources, used either separately or blended creatively into complex and unpredictable communicative practices (Higgins & Ikeda, 2021; Ros i Solé, 2022). The repertoire of new migrants in the linguistic landscape often features a combination of fragmented and diverse language varieties (Nambu, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). For example, Chinese migrants may combine Chinese, English, and other languages on shop signs as the medium of communication with an intended multilingual audience (see Figure 2.4). This advertisement sign consists of vernacular Chinese '旅游必败' (lit. travel must-buy) in which '败' is homophonic with 'buy'. The Japanese translation, 'りょこう必敗' (lit. travel must lose), appears to involve an inaccurate use of kanji likely influenced by the Chinese. The presence of WeChat QR code, a Chinese social media platform, further suggests that the implied interlocutors, shop owners and consumers, might be part of a social network that is both local to the neighbourhood and translocally connected with other Chinese migrants.

This example shows that languages may be mobilised and dislocated from fixed spatial and temporal positions to become part of the transnational contexts (see also Jaworski, 2014). Real-life linguistic practices of diasporas bear traces of both their homeland and migration trajectories. However, viewing language as a mobile resource does not only simply imply that language moves across regions or countries in its entirety (Palviainen, 2013). As Blommaert (2010) points out, 'the repertoires of new migrants tend to be "truncated": highly specific bits of language and literacy varieties combine in a repertoire that reflects the fragmented and highly diverse life-trajectories and environments of such people' (p. 8). Languages do not correlate neatly with social identities such as class, gender, and age. Instead, the meaning and value of mobilised language resources are reconstructed by larger social processes and historical conditions of the situated environment. The visibility of Chinese, English, and Japanese does not necessarily correspond with the multilingual identities of Chinese migrants but is more likely to reflect the processes of commodification and composition of the globalised neighbourhood.

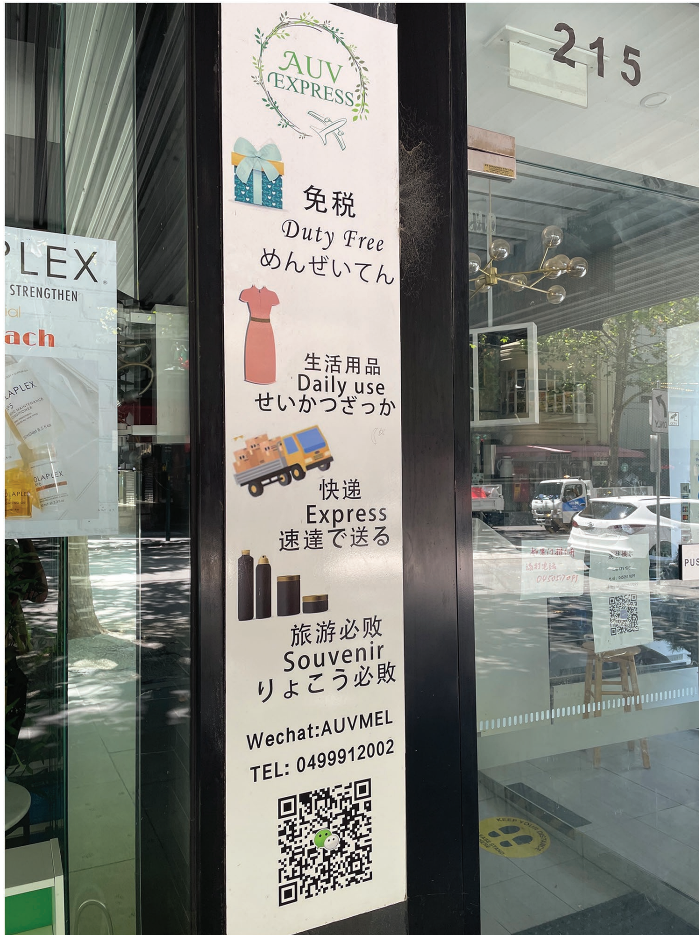

Figure 2.4 AUV Express store sign.

The presence of translocal migrant communities calls for a renewed understanding of space as a key concept in linguistic landscape research. Space was once seen as the geographical demarcation of a physical region (Landry & Bourhis, 1997), or later, as a social place filled with various symbolic and material practices (Aronin et al., 2018). From the sociolinguistics of globalisation perspective, however, space is multi-layered and stratified, characterised by mobility, unpredictability, and complexity (Vandenbroucke, 2018). The multiplicity of urban, superdiverse spaces becomes clear when we examine Figure 2.5, where traditional Chinese characters contrast with globalised standard English, heritage buildings with modern skyscrapers, ethnic ambience with mundane cosmopolitanism. The linguistic landscape, therefore, consists of various signs catering to established resident communities, recent immigrants, and occasional cultural consumers.

In fact, the movement of people across space also involves a movement of their values, norms, expectations, and conceptions of social order (Stroud & Jegels, 2014). Different value systems inevitably interact with the established stratification and constraints of the locality, resulting in new complexities in the material, cultural, and linguistic landscapes (Blommaert & Huang, 2013). For instance, Chinese languages would have more currency in the Melbourne Chinatown, but these languages, especially the traditional Chinese script, have limited mobility potential because their scope of use is constrained by the ethnic spectacle. More importantly, migrants encounter situations that require them to stretch their repertoires and engage in language hybridity and mixing, such as using Chinese and English languages and semiotics to attract tourists to Chinatown. In such cases, participants with access to multiple linguistic and social repertoires of prestigious language varieties are likely

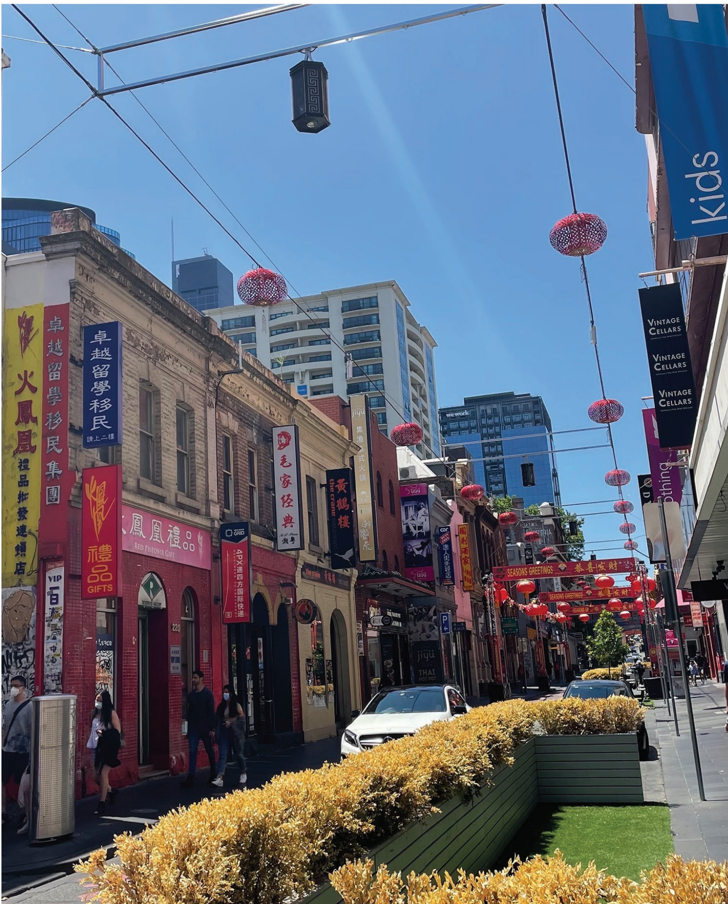

Figure 2.5 Melbourne Chinatown.

to be more powerful and dominant in this landscape (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2019), thus bringing the critical problem of power and equality to the fore.

The sociolinguistics of globalisation perspective privileges an ethnographic approach to language and space, which complements the synchronic, snapshot view of linguistic landscape analysis. While a panoramic survey of the linguistic landscape can provide a diagnostic account of the multilingualism in a given area, a historicised reading of language practices adds valuable insights into the transformation and organisation of diversity in globalised urban areas (Blommaert, 2013; Maly, 2016). That said, the labelling of migrant communities as superdiverse neighbourhoods has faced several criticisms. One caveat is that most superdiversity investigations adopt a purely linguistic focus, even though in reality other semiotic modalities, such as images and objects, have become increasingly important in intercultural communication (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Jaworski, 2015). Therefore, analysis of superdiverse neighbourhoods should extend beyond multilingualism to incorporate the 'multi-semiotic complexity of the representations we produce and see around us', referred to as multimodal practices (Iedema, 2003, p. 33).

Flores and Lewis (2016) argue that superdiversity is no more than a banal idea that over-emphasises the novelty of linguistic diversity. Empirical evidence supports this view, as seen in Dutch classrooms where students reported to no particular excitement regarding commonplace diversity (Siebers, 2018). Pennycook and Otsuji (2019) also highlight that hybrid language activities are mundane and ordinary, since 'diversity is not exotic or something that others have, but key to all experience; diversity has temporal dimensions as part of repeated everyday practice' (p. 175). Another significant criticism of superdiversity is in relation to its theoretical vacuity. Pavlenko (2018) contends that terms such as superdiversity, complexity, and unpredictability function more as academic slogans than components of a solid theoretical framework. Vertovec's (2019) investigation of superdiversity publications reveals considerable incongruence in the interpretation of superdiversity, with some using it merely as a new context for study or as a concept to mean increased diversity and ethnicity. Flores and Lewis (2016) further argue that using superdiversity as a blanket term to characterise language practices may erase historical differences and conceal social inequalities among migrant communities (see also Pavlenko, 2018).

However, Grzymala-Kazlowska and Phillimore (2019) have demonstrated that the concept of superdiversity can be beneficial to counteract the oversimplification of ethnic and national identities of migrants. Despite the tendency to privilege European contexts, understanding migrants as situated in the flows of globalisation and multilingualism can still be useful for dissecting power hierarchies by directing our attention to social stratification and exclusion in the public discourse (Arnaut et al., 2016). A key challenge is translating the sociolinguistics of globalisation perspective into an applicable framework for empirical analysis of the linguistic landscape. In response, Blommaert (2013) advocates for the use of Nexus Analysis to account for the macro social organisation grounded in the nexus of micro-interactions.

Nexus analysis, developed by Scollon and Scollon (2004), investigates the interface of human-sign meaning-making by considering three critical components: the historical body (life experiences of social actors), discourses in place (the emplacement of signs in spatial environment), and the interaction order (the order of communicative conduct by individuals in specific context). Akin to geosemiotics, nexus analysis shares a concern for emplacement and interaction order but emphasises *people* as products of their experiences and *space* as shaped by historical contexts. From this perspective, sign-making practices in migrant neighbourhoods should be investigated ethnographically to reveal the historical processes of social development and transformation. Through comprehensive observations of the multiple modalities and affordances offered by signs, it is possible to reveal the semiotic choices, cultural capital, social stratification, and class mobility within migrant communities, and most importantly, how socioeconomic power is inequitably distributed among different social groups (Blommaert, 2013).

The sociolinguistics of globalisation perspective encourages us to view the linguistic landscape as complex and multi-scalar sociolinguistic systems undergoing constant transformation. Sign makers, in communication, constantly draw on resources, expectations, and experiences from local, national, or even transnational scales (Arnaut et al., 2016). Conducting both synchronic and diachronic analyses of the linguistic landscape in local neighbourhoods would allow for a comprehensive view of the *history* (sociolinguistic contexts), the *future* (intended uptake by audience), and the *present* of signs (emplacement and position relative to other language items) (Maly & Blommaert, 2019).

Metrolingualism: Fluid translanguaging practices

The preceding discussion suggests that linguistic landscape analysis would benefit from integrating the semiotics of visuals and spaces and considering the mobility and histories of people and languages. These theories, however, have not adequately addressed the fluidity and fragmentation inherent in communicative events. Increasingly, evidence of wordplay (Alomoush, 2023) and script-mixing (Li & Zhu, 2019) has emerged in the linguistic landscape, which challenges the notion that languages can be defined and enumerated by static patterns of sounds and sequences of words. Pennycook and Otsuji (2016) notably critique this foundational assumption of the multilingualism paradigm, arguing instead for a 'metrolingualism' perspective that recognises the hybridity and fluidity of language practices in specific temporal and spatial contexts.

To understand metrolingualism, it is essential to examine the related concepts of 'polylanguaging' and 'translanguaging'. Polylanguaging describes the practice whereby 'languagers use features that are associated with a range of different languages, and even in cases when they know very little about these languages' (Jørgensen & Møller, 2014, p. 190). The prefix 'poly-' is used to differentiate this concept from multilingualism, as the latter implies a discrete view of languages, intrinsic inequalities, and a synchronic approach to linguistic phenomena (Jaspers & Madsen, 2016). Central to the argument of polylanguaging is the idea that language

users may adhere to a polylingual norm and consciously use linguistic features perceived by their interlocutors as being drawn from different languages and assembled in situ (Jørgensen & Møller, 2014). In this sense, while polylanguaging challenges traditional models of language, it simultaneously encourages the labelling of each observed transgression of established language categories, which in turn presupposes the existence of separate languages (Jaspers & Madsen, 2016).

Translanguaging, on the other hand, highlights how language learners exhibit linguistic hybridity by employing oral, written, and gestural resources to construct meaning, and how individuals' diverse backgrounds and identities are made apparent through the new language practices they display in social interactions (García & Li, 2014). Translanguaging has primarily been applied to examine the shift from a monolingual and native-like teaching paradigm to one that values language diversity and communicative competence in educational settings (Li & García, 2022), although more recently it has been extended to account for playful, creative, and heterogeneous language practices in public and digital settings (Costley et al., 2023; Rajendram et al., 2022). Gorter and Cenoz (2015) observe that 'translanguaging in the linguistic landscape is characterised by having multilingualism as the norm, involving multilingual and multimodal repertoires that are used in a social context' (p. 64). In other words, the linguistic landscape can be seen as a repertoire of features drawn from languages, fonts, images, colours, and materials. As such, translanguaging practices can be driven by the communication demands of people in globalised, urban spaces.

Pennycook (2017) suggests that translanguaging should start to question the borders between semiotic modes and become more sensitive to the wider socioeconomic processes of economy and policymaking in public spaces. With the growing interest in how language resources are manipulated by users to reveal language ideologies, and the recognition that code-switching and code-mixing are mundane linguistic activities in any heterogeneous society, Pennycook (2017) posits that *metrolingualism* provides a more compelling response to the multiplicity, hybridity, and diversity of contemporary communicative events. The prefix 'metro' in metrolingualism is derived from the concept of *metroethnicity*, which refers to 'a hybridised 'street' ethnicity deployed by a cross-section of people with ethnic or mainstream backgrounds who are oriented towards cultural hybridity, cultural/ethnic tolerance and a multicultural urban lifestyle in friendships, music, the arts, eating and dress' (Maher, 2005, p. 83). The origins of metrolingualism thus partly explain its primary concern for language ideologies, resources, and repertoires.

Unlike multilingualism, which assumes that language, culture, ethnicity, and locality are essentially connected, metrolingualism focuses on the production and rearrangement of these relationships as they emerge from language use in authentic interactions (Pennycook, 2017). Language can thus be seen as a social practice that taps into a broad semiotic repertoire, rather than an abstract system devoid of time, space, and mobility (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010). More importantly, the metrolingual view emphasises the local perspectives of language users who often engage in hybrid practices in metropolitan areas. These areas, characterised by superdiversity, are fertile grounds for the emergence of innovative forms of language

and subjectivity. Accordingly, studies of metrolingualism frequently investigate marketplaces (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014a), restaurants (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014b), urban streets (Gonçalves, 2019; Järlehed, 2019), and prolific social media platforms (Dovchin & Pennycook, 2017; Yao, 2023) as key sites of investigation.

In contrast to polylanguaging, metrolingualism does not presume that speakers are oriented towards transgressive language practices; instead, it acknowledges that linguistic regularities ensue from interactions (Jaspers & Madsen, 2016). Its focus on the interrelationship of linguistic repertoires and local spaces makes it particularly well-suited as a theoretical foundation for linguistic landscape. Figure 2.6, for example, shows a creative insertion of the Chinese character '中' (lit. central) that resembles and replaces the letter 'o' in the English orthography. Below the English text 'Confucius Says …' is a sentence written in traditional Chinese characters: '孔子曰:貓本烤魚實誠够品' (lit. Confucius says: Melbourne grilled fish is authentic and of good taste), where '貓本' is a homophone or transliteration of 'Melbourne', indicating the physical space where this language item is embedded. It is often believed that this type of language mixing is rare between Chinese and Roman languages due to their distinct written systems (but see Li & Zhu, 2019). However, the multicultural neighbourhood on Lygon Street (also known as 'little Italy', as implied by the gelato sign), the multiple waves of migration to Melbourne, and the lenient language policy on the use of languages, scripts, and semiotic resources in public signage have made these creations a natural, emergent, and mundane part of the urban scenery.

Metrolingualism adopts a strong semiotic orientation, which distinguishes itself from earlier theories that focus on code-switching or code-mixing. As Pennycook (2017) suggests, languages and spaces are intertwined, and at any given time and place, 'people, linguistic resources, products and spatial organisation come together to produce interactions' (p. 275). For example, Pennycook and Otsuji

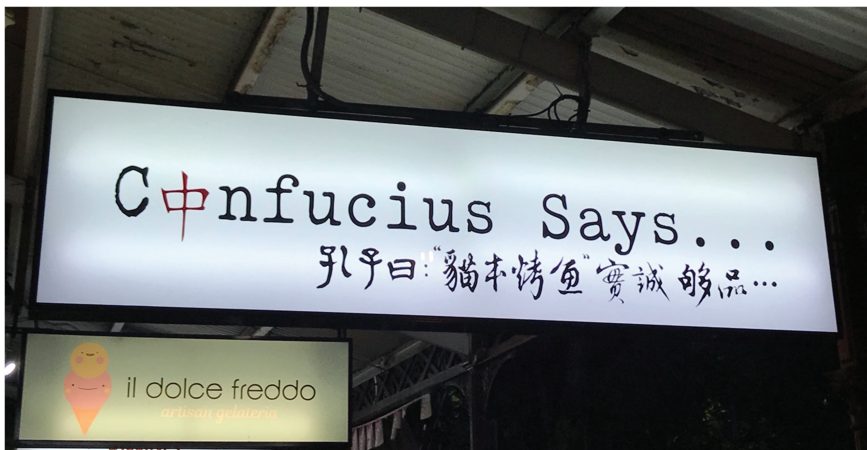

Figure 2.6 Grilled fish shop sign.

(2014a) demonstrate that *metrolingua francas*—the use of available multimodal resources that enables communication among interlocutors from different linguistic backgrounds—can emerge from the 'semiotic assemblages' of: (1) individuals with distinctive migration histories, (2) diverse linguistic resources related to business activities, (3) fresh produce on sale, and (4) the size and location of warehouse in the marketplace. For linguistic landscape analysis, this means that we should move away from the singular focus on individual signs to examining how the semiotic assemblages of people, languages, materials, and activities facilitate meaning-making.

When applied to analysing signs in the linguistic landscape, metrolingualism can uncover situated language use and the diversity in urban space. The prefix 'metro-' in metrolingualism signifies a strong analytical focus on metropolitan cities, whose spatial, temporal, and historical dimensions are continually shaped and reshaped by social interactions, multimodalities, materialities, and mobilities (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2019). However, the primary focus on 'metro' or 'the urban' has drawn criticism for being too narrowly defined (Jaspers & Madsen, 2016). Even though Otsuji and Pennycook (2010) argue that metrolingualism can be extended beyond city boundaries, empirical studies still prioritise the urban contexts (e.g., Pennycook & Otsuji, 2019). Most recently, the term translanguaging has been extended to describe 'language as a multilingual, multisemiotic, multisensory, and multimodal resource for sense- and meaning-making' (Li, 2018, p. 22), which makes the distinctions between translanguaging and metrolingualism more ambiguous. To some extent, the 'metro-' prefix seems redundant, as the repeated emphasis on metropolitan areas can divert our attention from the analysis of fluid and hybrid 'languaging practices' (cf. Li & Lee, 2023).

Metrolingualism has two significant implications for our investigations of the linguistic landscape. Theoretically, metrolingualism orients us to not only 'the expected' (mundane multilingual practices in everyday life) but also 'the unexpected' (multimodalities, mobilities, and materialities) in urban environments (Pennycook, 2012). Signs, broadly conceived as linguistic or semiotic items that collectively constitute the linguistic landscape, are constructed within social interactions occurring in the public space (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Importantly, such space is not limited to the terrestrial world and may include online digital platforms featuring an abundance of innovative, transgressive, and hybrid communicative practices (Kallen et al., 2020). Methodologically, metrolingualism challenges the quantitative counting of languages, arguing that the meaning of languages cannot be separated from the other components of semiotic assemblages. Instead, the metrolingualism perspective advocates for an ethnographic approach, using observations, interviews, and recordings of conversations to establish how metrolingoing practices unfold. By investigating the emplacement of signs in the environment, their intertextual relationships with other signs, and how linguistic landscape participants interact with the signs, we can potentially understand how individuals' capacity to access the meanings of certain languages, visuals, objects, and materials is shaped by personal histories, social statuses, power relations, and economic activities.

Towards a historical, spatial, and material framework for the linguistic landscape

Geosemiotics, sociolinguistics of globalisation, and metrolingualism have shed light on the historical, social, and material nature of space. The inseparability of time and space in the linguistic landscape aligns with the concept of chronotope—spatiotemporal configurations that organise sociohistorical norms and contextualise discourses in meaning-making (Blommaert, 2013; Lyons & Karimzad, 2019). The linguistic landscape, as a chronotope, encapsulates sociolinguistic conventions that not only orient social actors' behaviours, but also organise their experiences, and prescribe evaluative criteria for what is permissible and what is not (Karimzad, 2021). Therefore, various semiotic resources are mobilised to construct different scales that are associated with various identities, indexicalities, and values.

Essentially, linguistic landscape studies investigate the intersection of language, and space to understand communicative practices in context (Gonçalves, 2019; Lamb & Sharma, 2021). This unique focus on the role of space in meaning-making ensues from the multimodal, spatial, and material turn in social theory and discourse studies (Aronin et al., 2018). This perspective challenges the centrality and exceptionalism of human agency, re-evaluates the relationship between humans and animals, and assesses the impact of material objects on human behaviours (Pennycook, 2018, 2019). As such, there is an increasing emphasis on how the 'historical trajectories of people, places, discourse, ideas, and objects come together' in social interactions (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 159). This is well captured by the notions of spatial repertoires and semiotic assemblages in the metrolingualism framework.

Linguistic landscape studies thus respond to the call for posthumanist applied linguistics, by expanding the semiotic terrain from languages to multimodal resources, locating meanings outside the cognitive capacity of human beings, and recognising the agency of material objects in organising social actions (Pennycook, 2018; Pennycook, 2024). The shift from linguistic to semiotic landscapes echoes recent developments in the theorisation of language, which not only recognises the multimodal nature of languages, but also semiotic resources beyond languages and how they are mobilised for meaning-making. To summarise, linguistic landscape studies are conducted based on the following three basic premises:

1 The formation of linguistic landscapes is not random and arbitrary, but rather systematic and consistent, indicative of public and private ideologies (but see Pennycook, 2018 on unintentionality).
2 Linguistic landscape is the symbolic construction of the public space, and language use in such a place does not always correspond with sign owners' linguistic competence and identity.
3 Both written texts and multimodal resources on public signs afford valuable insights into the meanings of communicative practices.

Underlined by these assumptions, researchers have worked towards expanding the linguistic landscape by bringing in new perspectives. Current trends in the field of linguistic landscape include:

1. Drawing on theoretical approaches from multiple disciplines to account for multilingual, multimodal, and multisensorial communication in various contexts.
2. Employing symbiotic approaches by combining qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis and exploring the use of digital methods to investigate the linguistic landscape.
3. Using the linguistic landscape as an avenue to reveal social injustices and respond to the critical agenda pertaining to the broader field of applied linguistics.

This chapter has discussed the scope of the linguistic landscape and the theories of geosemiotics, sociolinguistics of globalisation, and metrolingualism, each of which contribute a unique perspective, such as place semiotics, social stratification, and fluid language practices. This integrated theoretical framework forms the basis for understanding the historical, spatial, and material components of the linguistic landscape.

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