

English in the linguistic landscape of Suzhou

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Creative, fluid and transgressive English practices in a Chinese city

Introduction

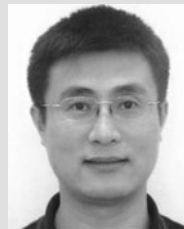
The concept of linguistic landscape (LL) covers all of the linguistic objects that mark the public space, i.e. any written sign one observes from road signs to advertising billboards, to the names of shops, streets or schools (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Because it both shapes and is shaped by social and cultural associations (Ben-Rafael, 2009; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010: 6–23), the LL has proved an important area for investigating the dynamics of major aspects of social life (e.g. Backhaus, 2006; Huebner, 2006; Curtin, 2009; Lado, 2011; Papen, 2012). One strand of this research is particularly concerned with the role of LL in relation to ethnolinguistic vitality that ‘makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup relations’ (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977: 308). The higher the vitality an ethnolinguistic group enjoys, the more it will be able to use language so as to survive and thrive as a collective entity.

This article examines the use of English in the LL of Suzhou, China. Located in the Yangtze river delta and bordering Shanghai to the east, Suzhou is in a dynamic phase of social transformation. This makes it an excellent site for such a study. As Suzhou becomes increasingly open and internationalized, the LL there exhibits remarkable displays of English, the scripts of which signify additional notions of what it means to be ‘Suzhounese’ today. The main objective of the article is to investigate whether, and how, the presence and uses of English in the public space of Suzhou asserts itself as a distinctive and active collective entity, either directly or indirectly. The theoretical assumption is that space can be configured as a particular place through the language used in signage, and a place is a product of competing

representations and imaginings (Pennycook, 2009); and that the styles of signs are ‘statements of place, belonging, group membership, and style’ (Pennycook, 2009: 309). By examining the particular features of English used in the LL of Suzhou, this study intends to explore how English as a global language is deconstructed and reconstituted in this context.

Ethnolinguistic profile of Suzhou

Since the implementation of recent reform and opening-up policies in China, Suzhou has been developing itself from a historic city into a modern city of diversity and vitality. Despite being medium in size, Suzhou is ranked the top 6th in the release of the 2013 China’s GDP Rankings (*Subaonet.com*, 2014). The diversity and vitality of Suzhou are reflected in many ways. As stated by the CPC Secretary of Suzhou in an online conversation with Chinese netizens on March 3, 2007 (*Xinhuanet.com*, 2007), Suzhou is a distinctive city comprising three geography-constitutive



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sections or sites, i.e. Old Suzhou, New Suzhou, and Foreign Suzhou, each with the perceived status of a driving force depending on the economic hierarchy and developmental model in that particular section. It is a city homing more than seven million migrants, nearly half of the total inhabitants, which ranks Suzhou the second most attractive city in China judged principally by the total number of migrants (*Chinadaily.com.cn*, 2012). *Putonghua*, a variety of Northern Chinese spoken in Beijing, is the common language used in daily communication among inhabitants. However, the indigenous people of Suzhou also speak the *Wu* language, one of six major Southern dialects prevalent in the coastal regions and the Yangtze River delta around the city of Shanghai. Though English is far from becoming a spoken language there, like other Chinese people, inhabitants of Suzhou tend to equate or associate English with modernity, sophistication, and high technology.

Data of the study

This study emerges from data in the form of photographs taken from non-official public signage in three sections of Suzhou collected in January and February 2014.¹ It does not consider international or foreign brands in English such as Auchan, Carrefour, McDonald's, KFC and Starbucks; neither is official signage considered such as the English translations of street names, institutions, metro stations, and government buildings, all of which are strictly government sanctioned.² A total number of 204 photographs were collected of English on storefronts, in shop windows, in billboards, in posters etc., as well as English names of stores, restaurants, pubs, and commercial and residential buildings. They were grouped into four types of sign: (1) where the information is given in both Chinese and English; (2) where there is a partial or overlapping translation; (3) where there is the mixture of the first and the second cases; and (4) where English is inserted into or mixed with Chinese. For studying unregulated bilingual landscapes as indicators of ethnolinguistic vitality, Franco-Rodriguez (2009) proposes looking at actual linguistic traits including lexicon, grammar, code-switching, and orthography. This study follows this methodological approach to examine examples of English usage in the LL of Suzhou with a particular focus on English lexicon.

Findings and discussion

The analysis of the data discovered four major, broadly defined linguistic tactics: inventive

portmanteaus, bilingual paronomasia, transgressive romanization, and exocentric compounds. These linguistic tactics highlight the creative, fluid, and transgressive capacity of language practice and need not be considered as always mutually exclusive. It is creative in that it deliberately deviates from the commonly accepted and institutionalized systems for a special effect. It is fluid in the sense not only that the use of English is not operated within a single traditional language boundary but that it does not belong to either English or Chinese or even Chinglish. It is transgressive in the sense that the use of English disrupts and traverses well-established language boundaries (Pennycook, 2007, 2009). In the discussion that follows we will consider each of these tactics in turn.

Inventive portmanteaus

One conspicuous feature observed in the LL of Suzhou was that of inventive portmanteaus, or the blending of two words to produce a neologism. For instance, in English 'smog' is a portmanteau created by the combination of 'smoke' and 'fog', as is 'infomercial', resulting from the conflation of 'information' and 'commercial'. Blending in English is typically accomplished by taking only the beginning of one word and joining it to the end of the other word, and only a few blends are the result of combining the beginnings of both words, such as 'telex' (teleprinter/exchange) or 'modem' (modulator/demodulator). Surprisingly, however, portmanteaus I discovered are quite inventive in that they result either from the combination of the final of a Chinese syllable with an English word, or that of a Pinyin (the Chinese phonetic system) with an English word, or from the mixture of an English word, a Pinyin, and an English word.

A grocery store name, *wtown*, paired with its name in Chinese, 梧桐 (*wutong*), which translates to 'buttonwood' (see Figure 1), is an example of inventive portmanteaus of the first type. Specifically, *wtown* is an attachment of the final of the Chinese syllable *wu*³ to the English word *town*, but there is no semantic relation between them as would normally be expected from a portmanteau. Inspired from the Pinyin *wutong* with the similar pronunciation, *wtown* has a phonemic overlap of *wutong*. The principle of 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1963, 1981, cited in Ben-Rafael, 2009: 45) states that a major motivation underlying shop names or advertisements is to accentuate difference, ensuring brand distinctiveness and recognition. By using the sinicized English word as its name, the grocery store aims



Figure 1. Shop name of a grocery store, *Wtown*

to set itself apart from other businesses, which typically use standard or pure English names. This is congruent with the principle of ‘good-reasons’ (Ben-Rafael, 2009), which suggests that diversity must be constrained by local taste and tendencies. The phonemic overlap is exploited to render *wtown* in a form that can be easily pronounced by most passers-by, who are non-English speakers. This reasonably leads to the perception of *wtown* as an English-language expression that conveys symbolic rather than referential meanings.

Figure 2 presents the name of a youth hostel in English, *mingtown*, which is a blending of the Pinyin ‘ming’ (*lit.* bright) and the English word ‘town’, in addition to the Chinese name, 明堂 (*mingtang*, *lit.* bright hall or room). Another example is *holiland*, the English store name given to a bakery, in parallel to the name in Chinese, 好利来 (*haolilai*, *lit.* good, benefit, come), which results from the combination of the English word ‘ho’, the Pinyin ‘li’ (*lit.* benefit), and the English word ‘land’ (see Figure 3). Interestingly, *ho* and *land*, which roughly rhyme with the Chinese morphemes *hao* and *lai* respectively, take on semantic meanings that have nothing to do with the original meanings represented in the English words. So is *town* in *mingtown*. It makes sense to argue that both *holiland* and *mingtown* are the homophonous mapping of the Pinyin *haolilai* and *mingtang* respectively. More speculatively, perhaps, with its explicit meaning of ‘Good and



Figure 2. Name of a youth hostel, *Mingtown*



Figure 3. Shop name of a bakery store, *Holiland*

benefits come (to you)’, it could also be argued that *haolilai* is being used as a benediction appealing to the emotions of Chinese customers by referring intertextually to Chinese traditional culture of greeting others with goodwill. *Mingtang* refers traditionally to the hall for China’s Emperor and his ministers to discuss national affairs; when used as the name for a youth hostel, it has the function of awakening reminiscences of China’s imperial past, implying that this hostel is offering royal levels of service to its guests. Due to the homophonous mapping, it is suggestive of the transference of the conventional implicatures of *haolilai* and *mingtang* to their equivalents in English – *holiland* and *mingtown*.

Just as *wtown* exploits convergence in meaning as well as distinctiveness in language, *holiland* and *mingtown* are created to negotiate the meanings of linguistic imperialism. While on one level the examples of inventive portmanteaus are connected to the postcolonial use of English, this English is ultimately divergent and cannot be easily assumed to be one entity. The linguistic tactics of inventive portmanteaus disrupt and destabilize established boundaries between English and Chinese to such an extent that it calls into question, on the one hand, the necessity of the very boundaries of language, and on the other hand, the narrative of China as a slavish and uncritical ‘consumer’ of English.

Transgressive romanization

Transgressive romanization is another linguistic tactic observed in the LL of Suzhou, which I define as idiosyncratic romanization that deliberately deviates from typical romanization standards in some signs. As the Chinese language does not use an alphabetic script, romanization is naturally useful for representing words that do not necessarily have an English-language translation. Pinyin is the romanized spelling system officially adopted in the People’s Republic of China, and is used to annotate



Figure 4. Brand name of a chain restaurant, *Larsho*



Figure 5. Brand name of a home textiles manufacturer, *Fazeya*

standard Chinese sounds that are not represented in Chinese script. For instance, ‘Suzhou’, in the romanized Pinyin system, is a romanization of 苏州, the character in the official Chinese orthography, using the Romanization system. Transgressive romanization, however, underscores the textual creativity and the traversability of language boundaries.

A good example of transgressive romanization is ‘larsho’, an English name given to a chain restaurant (see Figure 4). Under the Romanization system, this name would be romanized as ‘lanxiang’ based on the Chinese name of the restaurant, 揽香, which translates approximately to ‘appetizing seizer’. Figure 5 shows another example of transgressive Romanization, ‘fazeya’, the English brand name for a home textiles manufacturer; but in the light of its name in Chinese, 恒源祥, which translates roughly to ‘eternal source of auspiciousness’, it would traditionally be romanized as ‘hengyuanxiang’.

Detected on the plaque placed on the top of the entrance of a restaurant that serves special local snacks, ‘Pin-Von’, as the English name given to the restaurant, provides a further distinctive example of transgressive romanization. As shown in Figure 6, the restaurant is named in Chinese,



Figure 6. Brand name of a snack restaurant, *Pin Von*

品芳, which literally translated to ‘taste or sample fragrance’ in English, would normally be romanized as ‘pinfang’. Yet, while the Chinese character, 品, as a morpheme meaning ‘taste’ or ‘sample’ being traditionally romanized as ‘pin’, the romanization of the Chinese character, 芳 (*fang*, lit. fragrance), as ‘von’ is apparently transgressed. Surprisingly, however, *Pin-Von* is still semantic and phonemic in that *von* as a morpheme connoting ‘distinguished’ is both semantic and phonemic. Due to the shared medial or nucleus /a/, it exploits a phonemic overlap between the English syllable *von* and the Chinese syllable *fang*. But /f/, the initial of the Chinese syllable, is adapted into /v/, the onset of the English syllable, which is absent from the Chinese inventory,⁴ and /ŋ/, the final of the Chinese syllable, into /n/, the coda of the English syllable. The transgressive romanization of 芳 is tactical in that it incorporates an additional element of creativity, suggesting the transferability of the associative meaning of *von* to 芳. Beyond this, however, the use of *Pin-Von* in parallel with *pinfang* makes potential customers of the restaurant have a feeling of being served as a distinguished person. In other words, the transgressive romanization of 芳 is made to help *pinfang* bear the sense of *von*. Like *holiland* and *mingtown* discussed above, *Pin-Von* therefore can be taken as an example of bilingual paronomasia, or punning with two languages.

Bilingual paronomasia

As a linguistic tactic that especially underscores the textual creativity in the LL of Suzhou and the fluidity of language boundaries, bilingual paronomasia is particularly deserving of a separate discussion. The essence of the bilingual pun is that an English word is made to bear the sense of a Chinese word, or vice versa. For Nash (2013:



Figure 7. Billboard advertising for China Mobile

145), homophonic accident, homonymic/semantic contrivance, and literal translation are the common means by which bilingual puns are produced. The punning of the examples discussed above, *PinVon*, *holiland* and *mingtown*, attribute far more to homonymic contrivance than to homonymic accident. Equally noticeable are the different ways in which their double meanings are generated. Specifically, while the double meaning of the former results from the direct transference of the connotation of *von* to the Chinese word *fang*, the latter two involve reference to intertextual allusion as it is producible by the Chinese expressions *haolilai* and *mingtown*.

Bilingual puns in the LL of Suzhou are not always engaged with homonyms, but sometimes instead with the syntactic ‘hinge’ (Hill, 1985), i.e., a word or phrase capable of both meanings due to its bearing of more than one grammatical category. For example, in the ‘Good Will Hunting’ movie, the word ‘hunting’ is taken either as a noun modified by good will or part of the character’s name, Will Hunting. It is through the syntactic hinge that both the meanings of hunting for good will and Will Hunting being good are successfully yielded by the title. A good example of such bilingual puns is the code-mixed phrase ‘随e行’ (see Figure 7) appeared on the billboard advertising China Mobile’s service of WLAN. The typeface of the English letter, *e*, connected closely to both 随 (*sui*, *lit.* follow) and 行 (*xing*, *lit.* go, move, travel),⁵ makes it look like the logo of Microsoft’s Internet Explorer™ software. It is mixed in such a way that *e* is used either as a noun or an adjective. It is a noun referring to WLAN when both 随 (*sui*, *lit.* follow) and 行 (*xing*, *lit.* go, move, travel) are used as a verb. However, if 随 is used as the first part of the adverb in Chinese, 随意 (*suiyi*, *lit.* freely, with no constraint) modifying the verb *xing*, *e* becomes an adverb in light of the initial /i/ shared



Figure 8. Tabernacle for China Telecom

by the English syllable *e* and the Chinese syllable *yi*.⁶ In summary, the double meaning is produced not only by homophonic accident, but also in relation to the syntactic categories of the English word *e*.

Another striking example of bilingual punning is ‘飞young梦想’, appearing in the tabernacle promoting 天翼 (*tianyi*) meaning e-surfing, a package product offered by China Telecom (see Figure 8). This attempts to humorously adapt the Chinese-language expression of ‘飞扬梦想’ (*feiyang mengxiang*, *lit.* fly the dream upward) by blending the phonetically similar English adjective, ‘young’. Due largely to the phonemic overlap between the English expression *young* and the Chinese verb *yang*, the Pinyin spelling of 扬 (*lit.* raise, spread), it is reasonable to view the novel use of *young* as a verb as *yang*. This homophonic word play seems strategic in that it serves the function of inspiring a feeling among intended customers of becoming young people full of dreams.

Although the above examples of bilingual paronomasia exploit admittedly simple syllabic words, the ability or attempt to engage in wordplay across the languages of Chinese and English echoes the notion of transcultural flows discussed in Pennycook (2007). Each of these examples, as individual instances, may appear insignificant; in the aggregate, however, they highlight the LL of Suzhou as a site of unexpected and very fertile linguistic transgression.

Exocentric compounds

In addition to the sundry linguistic tactics detailed above, that of exocentric compounding is another emphasizing the creative and fluid practice of English usage in the LL of Suzhou. In English, of the two constituents of a compound, the rightmost one is normally its head. And the head is the part of a word or phrase that determines its



Figure 9. Brand name of an ornaments manufacturer, *Maysnow*

broad meaning and grammatical category. However, exocentric compounds cannot be interpreted as hyponymous of any one of their constituents. They are individually formed neologisms for individual businesses, the head of which is not necessarily the most dominant factor in determining their morphosyntactic and semantic properties.

For instance, *Maysnow*, a new term in English given to an ornaments manufacturer, is a joining of two separate English words ‘may’ and ‘snow’ (see Figure 9). By adding the word *may* to *snow* in this way, the word meaning ‘snow in May’, despite being unexpected, can be derived. The sign, in addition to the English text, features the Chinese-language expression of 梅纳雪 (*meinaixie*), which literally translates to ‘plum blossom, accept, and snow’. Also noticeable here are of the phonetic relations between *may* and 梅 (*mei*, *lit.* plum blossom), an instance of cross-language paronym, and of the semantic relations between *snow* and 雪 (*xie*, *lit.* snow) in that *snow* is the transliteration of 雪. Thus analyzed, *Maysnow* can be seen more as a case of linguistic interplay between Chinese and English than a combination of two separate English words.

Figure 10 presents another salient example of exocentric compounds, *Chez-Choux*, a name given to a patisserie shop chain, which is juxtaposed with the Chinese text, 西树泡芙 (*xishu paofu*, *lit.* West-tree puff). Neither phonetic nor semantic relations can be found between the English text and the Chinese text, and the English rule for conjoining words to form compounds cannot explain this compound. Setting aside the phonemic loan word, 泡芙 (*paofu*, *lit.* puff), compounding allows the two free words *chez* and *choux*, as well as 西 (*xi*, *lit.* west) and 树 (*shu*, *lit.* tree), to form the compound words *Chez-Choux* and 西树 arbitrarily. Therefore, like *wtown* noted above, *Chez-Choux* as a sign is not



Figure 10. Brand name of a patisserie shop chain, *Chez Choux*

English but rather a sign of Englishness, serving the symbolic function of signalling a complex of associative meanings evoking English chic and sophistication. Sun (2006) observed that the modern-Chinese morphemes relating to foreign things often include 西 in addition to 洋 (*yang*, *lit.* ocean) and 番 (*fan*, *lit.* foreign), such as 西医 (*xiyi*, *lit.* western medicine/doctor), 西装 (*xizhuang*, *lit.* western-style clothes), and 西餐 (*xican*, *lit.* western-style food). By the same token, the Chinese compound 西树 is assumed to be so invented as to link to the West, which is in congruent with the symbolic function of *Chez-Choux*.

Conclusion

By examining the linguistic tactics of English usage in the LL of Suzhou, this article presents the main ways in which English is deconstructed and reconstituted through transgressive language practices. The observations of this study strongly echo Makoni & Pennycook’s claim that we need to ‘regard both languages and nations as being co-constructed dialectally’ (2005: 140). The transgressive practice of English usage critiques the common perception of China and its people as desperate consumers of linguistic modernity. This, according to Ben-Rafael’s (2009: 46–7) principle of collective-identity, is a strategy to ‘signal particularisms – regional, ethnic or religious’ in multicultural societies, producing new possibilities of what it means to be Chinese, or here, more specifically, Suzhounese, and to participate in global discourses. On the other hand, transgressive language practice, through which the construction of Suzhou into a distinctive collective entity becomes possible, actually mirrors the initiative Suzhou takes in the local practice of English as a global language. Being adopted as a new, additional resource

for identity construction, English is locally deconstructed and reconstituted to such an extent that it has become a product of, or a variant only belonging to, Suzhou. ■

Notes

- 1 I wish to thank my students, Chunchun Xu and Juan Du, for their help with the collection of the data.
- 2 This is not meant to say that non-official signs in Suzhou are completely out of governmental control.
- 3 Within the official Pinyin spelling system, when there is no initial in a Chinese syllable, the medial /u/ is spelled as a *w*.
- 4 The onset of the English syllable, *von*, sometimes is weakened into /f/.
- 5 Depending on the context where it is used, the Chinese character 行 can work either as a verb (*xing*, *lit.* go, move, travel) or as a noun (*hang*, *lit.* line, row) or a classifier (*hang*, *lit.* line, row). Considering there being no number prior to it for modification, it is right to take the use of 行 here as a verb.
- 6 Within the official Pinyin spelling system, the medial /i/ is written as *y* at the syllable-initial position when there is no initial in a Chinese syllable.

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