

*A Comparative Analysis of Language and Typography Between Two Chinese Enclaves
in Singapore for Nostalgic Design Trends*

Min-Yee Angeline Yam, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Kristina Marie Tom, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Bee Chin Ng, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Abstract

Using the multimodality approach of Linguistic Landscape, this paper reports a comparative analysis of language composition and typographic treatment of signs found on historic shophouses in Singapore's two distinctive Chinese ethnic enclaves, Bukit Pasoh (Chinatown) and Joo Chiat Road. The choice of languages used and typographic treatment on signs are analysed in context of approaches to 'hipster aesthetics' in the marketing of nostalgia-based consumption, where private businesses have been observed to capitalize on signs found on traditional shophouses to appeal to consumers with nostalgic experiences. The analysis of signages on both sites utilize a substantial amount of English (both around 80%), followed by a similar significant number of signs displaying Chinese characters (20-30%) and transliteration of local Chinese vernaculars into romanised script (almost to 10%). Despite similarities in the top three languages' makeup of both sites, further typographic study of the signs reveals that each site has developed its own unique methods for communicating nostalgia through visual means. Signages of businesses in Bukit Pasoh have been noted to retain original typography found on the shophouses as a homage to the site's ethnic heritage, while Joo Chiat Road signages are mostly stripped of all its original typography, recreating a contemporary form of nostalgia appreciation that pays homage to Singapore's nostalgia visual communication landscape instead. By examining other modalities such as language and cultural identification in addition to the contextual placement of typography, this paper will demonstrate how the linguistic landscape frameworks can assist designers to understand nostalgic design.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape, Typography, Nostalgia Design, Cultural Identity, Visual Communication

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Introduction to Linguistic Landscape and Typography

The linguistic landscape is an emerging interdisciplinary field within the broader discipline of sociolinguistic and primarily advocates for the analysis of language beyond that of written text and oral, which is what linguistics are accustomed to doing, but rather to also consider the context of imagery, objects, and the placement of language, which is being situated in time, space and the people associated with it (Gorter, 2013; Järlehed & Jaworski, 2015).

Typography on the other hand is a longstanding genre within the discipline of visual communication (graphic design). It has traditionally been associated with the study and craft of letterform arrangements for both legibility and ease of viewing textual materials, and is often seen as secondary to the meaning of the written content (Baines & Haslam, 2005; Leeuwen, 2006). However in recent years, the definition has been renewed by Ambrose and Harris (2017) as “the means by which a written idea is given a visual form” (p.6), thus articulating typography’s capacity to impact communication in our everyday contemporary society. Typography as the art of making written language visually expressive thus offers linguistic landscape a visual modality for consideration when interpreting signs beyond text and oral. The framework used within the linguistic landscape here is thus the multimodality lens that also takes into typography as a visual communication means of the signage meaning.

As much as typography and language are intrinsically linked, these two subjects are rarely taught together. Scholars mostly work in silos within their own discipline and only a handful have made attempts to venture into each other’s genre. The disconnection between typography and language has since been pointed out by designers (Baines & Haslam, 2005) as well as linguists (Leeuwen, 2006; Machin, 2007) all calling out for more engagement and collaboration between the two disciplines.

It is however important to acknowledge that are current studies where linguistic and literacy scholars have started to make efforts to analyze signs and text by giving typography the recognition it deserves through English picture books (Serafini & Clausen, 2012), multilingual shop signs in Taiwan (Curtin, 2015) to mono-lingual signs in public space in China (Zhou, 2020). There are also designers who have been looking at typography in urban landscapes beyond its functional and aesthetic qualities, examining typography’s potential to reveal cultural stories (Banham, 2011; Lou, 2016; Villagomez, 2015), affecting emotions and cityscapes (Kwok, 2020) as well as the ability to influence human senses (Velasco, Hyndman, & Spence, 2018). However, none of the work has yet to utilized linguistic landscape frameworks for the use of visual communication understanding, particularly in typography.

Nostalgic Design Trends – The Rise of ‘Fauxtalgia’ Consumption

To further contextualize our research, the research team is particularly interested in the recent nostalgic design trends evident on signs of establishments in many of Singapore’s ethnic enclaves. This is primarily due to the declaration of government conservation status as well as the removal of rent control, which has resulted in gentrification of the area where businesses started to relocate to these areas as an alternative to the high rents in downtown areas (Kong & Sinha, 2016; Tourism Information & Service Hub, 2019).

These establishments have been seen to creatively capitalized and co-exist with the historical narrative of the ethnic enclaves, creating a kind of ‘fauxtalgia’ consumption trend that has become very appealing to a younger demographic in recent years, particularly among Gen Z and millennials (Brophy, 2019).

These establishment often market themselves with “hipster aesthetics” (including signs) to audiences yearning to be associated as creative middle-class individuals whose lifestyles place an importance to the value of authentic goods and production from the past (Celhay, Magnier, & Schoormans, 2020), evoking a sense of nostalgia even if they may have never lived through that period (Brophy, 2019).

This paper attempts to fill in the research gap by analyzing the role of typography on signs in Singapore’s two Chinese ethnic enclaves using linguistic landscape methodologies so as to initiate novel methods for analyzing “typographic landscapes” (Järlehed & Jaworski, 2015), providing new frameworks for visual communication designers to consider language and the socio-cultural context in which the typography will be situated in. In addition, interviewing of business owners will emphasize on signs that evoke a nostalgic sense of design. This study considers design aesthetics prior to the year 2000 to be “nostalgic” for purposes of context.

Research Question

The paper will analyze the similarities and differences between the linguistic landscapes of Bukit Pash and Joo Chiat Road, with the contextualization of nostalgic design trends. Linguistic landscape analysis is appropriate in this case because it helps reveal not only the use of languages within a specific area, it also allows for consideration of the type of current establishments that are concentrated there, as well how these establishments make decisions for their signage within the area and spaces surrounding the business.

The research questions of this study are as following:

1. What types of business, languages and language composition make up the linguistic landscape of Bukit Pasoh and Joo Chait Road ?
2. Why do nostalgia-based businesses choose to locate in these two research sites, and what is the rationale behind their choice of typography for their business signs?

Information About the Two Research Sites

The two sites selected for comparison are Chinatown (Chinese ethnic enclave) and Joo Chiat (Chinese-peranakan enclave) districts. Specific areas within the enclaves are further chosen for comparison based on the high number of gentrified activities that have occurred there. The selected area within Chinatown is known as Bukit Pasoh. Joo Chiat Road is the selected area within Joo Chiat.

Bukit Pasoh

Bukti Pasoh is about 20 acres and is one of four districts of Chinatown that retains the largest number of clans and associations, a legacy of the large Chinese immigrant support network that originated there in the 19th century. It was nicknamed ‘the street of clans.’ The Chinese community in the area expanded and used to be wealthy and bustling housing many

prestigious social clubs in the area that were instrumental to Singapore's resistance efforts during world war II. The area was also however associated with vice, and used to have a high concentration of brothels, gangs as well as opium and gambling dens (Roots, 2022; Tourism Information & Service Hub, 2019).

The area received conservation status by the government's Urban Redevelopment Authority in the late 1980s-90s and the traditional shophouses were up for sale. This gradually turned the area into a hotspot for trendy hotels and restaurants. As the area is still mainly lined with conserved traditional shophouses, it became a charming blend of the old and new alongside each other (Tourism Information & Service Hub, 2019).

Joo Chiat road

Joo Chiat road is about 31 acres and is long stretch of road located within the Joo Chiat district. The Joo Chiat area previously existed as a seaside retreat for the affluent but Joo Chiat Road itself was a dirt track running through several plantations (Chua, 2012). Throughout the the 1920s and 1930s, numerous communities gradually moved from the city center eastward to Joo Chiat establishing it as their home. This resulted in a specific Chinese community moving away from Chinatown (URA).

The area was designated as a conservation area in 1993 and the Chinese-Malay, Peranakan heritages as well as the Singaporean Eurasians are now recognized (Shaw & Ismail, 2006). However, in the early 2000s, Joo Chiat Road's reputation was marred by the influx of bars, hourly-rate hotels, dubious karaoke lounges and massage parlors. Through various government lobbying and community efforts, stricter law enforcement measures on the vice trades were eventually implemented, resulting in the closure of these establishments (Chua, 2012).

Joo Chiat has now become an attractive destination for F&B operators seeking unique suburban neighbourhoods, as it provides an alternative from the high rental typical of down town districts. The area has experienced an increase of traditional shophouses revamping, particularly along Joo Chiat Road and its surroundings, contributing to the ongoing gentrification process (The Business Times, 2022).

The linguistic background of Singapore

Singapore is a multiracial and linguistically diverse city in Southeast Asia with a total population of 5.5 million people. The three main ethnic groups are Chinese, Malay and Indian. The Chinese population comprised 74.3% of the total population, constituting the majority. The Malay, Indian and other ethnic group made up 13.5%, 9.0%, and 3.2% respectively, of the population. The remaining people are classified as 'Others', which includes Eurasians, Japanese, Arabs, Koreans etc (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2020).

According to Singapore's language policies, all four languages Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English are the four official languages of Singapore. Malay has been established as the "national language" and English has been identified as the de facto "working language." Chinese and Tamil designated as "mother tongue" (Tan, 2014). In accordance with the 1979 policy, the use of Chinese dialects like Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hainanese was discouraged. According to Wee (2009), the government views Chinese dialects as an additional burden in

the learning process, preventing Chinese Singaporeans from achieving proficiency in both standard English and Chinese.

In accordance with Singapore's bilingualism policy, all Singaporean students are required to learn English as their primary language and their respective mother tongues as a secondary language. This policy is implemented to ensure that Singaporeans have a competitive edge in the contemporary, interconnected economy. Additionally, the mother tongue plays a pivotal role in connecting Singaporeans with their ethnic groups' rich heritage, cultural expressions, and traditional values (Shang & Guo, 2016).

Methodology

Defining the unit of analysis

It is important to establish the unit of analysis for what constitute a “sign” in our linguistic landscape data collection. In this study, we referenced Nikolaou (2016) paper that followed Cenoz and Gorter (2006) guideline considering each establishment as the unit of analysis and not each individual sign because ‘each text belongs to a larger whole instead of being clearly separate’ (p. 71). Nikolaou (2016) also referenced Edelman’s study (2010) where only signs displayed on the shop window were considered and any signs found in the interior were excluded.

Following preceding case studies of linguistic landscape analysis, this research defines "sign" as any textual material found on the exterior of traditional shophouses. The establishment's exterior signs will be analyzed collectively. Included are signs that are directly painted, molded, mounted, hung, projected, suspended, or attached to the exterior walls of the infrastructure. This includes the shophouses’ ‘Residential Front,’ ‘Five-Foot Way, Column’, Pilaster, Frieze, Forecourt Wall, End Gable Wall and Rear Wall (URA, 2015). Therefore, materials such as menus, merchandise ads, posters affixed to the exterior of the establishment’s shophouse infrastructure for examples are included. Signs displayed on windows or doors inside the establishment will not be considered. 3D objects, board standees, and other freestanding signs are excluded as they are not permanent and can be removed easily.

These decisions are made based on the aim of this research, which is to examine the relationship of typography in repurposed traditional shophouse buildings, and its role in Singapore’s multicultural linguistic landscape. Therefore, only signs that are directly affixed to the exterior of the traditional buildings will be counted. Signages on the interior are not permanent, ever-changing and are not directly related to the traditional building itself, thus the exclusion. Even if all the signs in a single establishment use different languages or fonts, it is the company’s decision that determines the outcome and the overall impression of the establishment as a whole.

Comparative Analysis of the Two Areas

A comparative analysis is conducted to examine the business type category and language composition in two areas for quantitative data. Subsequently, a selection process is employed to identify establishments for interview using the collected quantitative data, which is further analyzed within the framework of nostalgia branding strategies adopted by businesses. To validate the findings in relation to our research inquiries, semi-structured interviews are

subsequently conducted with the business owners, providing further qualitative data for analysis.

Our approach employed in this study consisted of taking digital photographs of the signs of each establishment, as previously defined in the unit of analysis. The determination of the establishment type count is based on its perceptibility to the observer's visual line of sight. The photographs were captured over the period of around 20 days in October 2021 for Bukit Pasoh and over the period of around 5 days in July 2022. Bukit Pasoh was our first research site and hence took longer to establish criteria that defines the parameters of our subsequent research locations.

Results

Business Type Comparison

The business types in the two research sites are broken down in Tables 1 and 2. Food and beverage businesses (F&B) came out on top for each site, with Bukit Pasoh at 28% and Joo Chiat Road at 18%, and as previously observed, many of them lead the nostalgic design trend in ethnic enclaves. We observed that Bukit Pasoh continues to retain the legacy of clubs and association at 11.7%. We observed that Bukit Pasoh retains the legacy of clubs and associations at 11.7%. Joo Chiat has a high proportion of retail and offices after F&B.

Business type	Unit	Percentage
Food & Beverages (F&B)	93	27.93%
Clubs & Associations	39	11.71%
Arts, Media & Creative Services	32	9.61%
Beauty & Wellness	31	9.31%
Vacant / Unsigned	25	7.51%
Other Services	21	6.31%
Office	15	4.50%
Finance	11	3.30%
Educational Institutions & Training Centers	10	3.00%
Retail	9	2.70%
Hotel	7	2.10%
Consultant	6	1.80%
Law Firms	6	1.80%
Managements	4	1.20%
Logistic	4	1.20%
Entertainments	4	1.20%
Medical	3	0.90%
Religious Institutions	3	0.90%
Buildings & Apartments	3	0.90%
Wholesaler	3	0.90%
Engineering	3	0.90%
Retail F&B	1	0.30%
Total establishments:	333	100%

Table 1: Types of establishments in Bukit Pasoh (of Chinatown)

Business	Unit	Percentage
F&B (on-premises consumption)	66	18.13%
Retail	50	13.74%
Office	45	12.36%
Beauty wellness	30	8.24%
Retail F&B	27	7.42%
Other services	26	7.14%
Vacant / Unknown	22	6.04%
Creative services	18	4.95%
Grocery Store	14	3.85%
Pet Services	11	3.02%
Education	11	3.02%
Entertainment	11	3.02%
Medical	10	2.75%
Well-being Services	7	1.92%
Hotel	7	1.92%
Apartment	4	1.10%
Religious	3	0.82%
Clubs & Association	2	0.55%
Total establishments:	364	100%

Table 2: Types of establishments in Joo Chiat Road (of Joo Chiat)

Language Composition

The language composition of the enterprises in the two research sites is shown in Tables 3 and 4. Both sites' signages use a significant amount of English (around 80%), followed by a similar significant number of signs displaying Chinese characters (20-30%) and transliteration of local Chinese vernaculars into romanised script (almost to 10%).

Language	Units	Percentage
English	276	82.88%
Traditional Chinese Character	72	21.62%
Simplified Chinese Character	40	12.01%
Total Chinese Character	97	29.13%
Vernacular Transliteration	32	9.60%
Pinyin	9	2.70%
Malay	5	1.50%
Tamil	3	0.90%
Other Languages (Korean, Japanese, French, Italian, Viet, Thai, Spanish, African etc)	16	4.80%
Other Languages Transliteration	11	3.30%
Total Unit	333	NA

Table 3: Language composition in Bukit Pasoh (of Chinatown)

Language	Units	Percentage
English	315	86.54%
Traditional Chinese Character	36	9.89%
Simplified Chinese Character	40	10.99%
Total Chinese Character	71	19.50%
Vernacular Transliteration	27	7.42%
Malay	16	4.40%
Other Languages Transliteration	15	4.12%
Other Languages (Viet, Jap, Italian, Spanish, French, Sankrit etc)	13	3.57%
Pinyin	11	3.02%
Tamil Transliteration	6	1.65%
Pinyin + Transliteration	5	1.37%
Arabic	4	1.10%
Arabic Transliteration	3	0.82%
Tamil	2	0.55%
Total Unit:	364	NA

Table 4: Language composition in Joo Chiat Road (of Joo Chiat)

Conclusion

Despite similarities in the top three languages' makeup of both sites, further typographic study and understanding of the signs reveals that each site has developed its own unique methods of communicating nostalgia through visual means.

The selection of business owners for interviews for respond to our second research question inquiry will be based on the criteria derived from the quantitative data presented in table 1-4. The business owners who will be interviewed at each site should fall into the top five categories of business types as shown in table 1 and table 2. Their signs should include the English language as one the language options, evidenced as the prominent language usage in table 3 and 4. Lastly, it is also important that shortlisted establishments should embody a brand positioning that evokes a sense of nostalgia for its audience, whether it is a deliberate or inadvertent business strategy.

Interviews with business owners are still on-going at time of writing this proceeding but we have begun to observe that signages of businesses in Bukit Pasoh have been noted to retain original typography found on the shophouses as a homage to the site's ethnic heritage (see image 1), whereas Joo Chiat Road signages are mostly stripped of all its original typography, recreating a contemporary form of nostalgia appreciation that pays homage to Singapore's nostalgia visual communication landscape instead (see image 2).

This paper has begun to demonstrate how linguistic landscape frameworks can assist designers to understand nostalgic design beyond typographic aesthetics but also inform designers about the socio-cultural narrative of these ethnic enclaves by examining other modalities such as language and cultural identification in addition to the contextual placement of typography.



Image 1: A hospitality group in Bukit Pasoh retaining original typography of shophouse signs as part of the company's strategic brand offering



Image 2: An independently family-run Vietnamese café on Joo Chiat road recreating a contemporary form of nostalgia appreciation that pays homage to Singapore's nostalgia visual communication landscape of the 70s and 70s

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Contact email: angeline_yam@ntu.edu.sg