

A Study on Bilingual Linguistic Landscapes in Leshan Under the Background of Urban Internationalization

CHE Huan-huan

Leshan Normal University, Leshan, China

As a key node on the Southern Silk Road, an important city in the Chengdu-Chongqing Economic Circle, and the only city in Sichuan Province titled “World Heritage Site Inscribed Both for Its Cultural and Natural Values”, internationalization is an inevitable direction for Leshan’s urban development. However, research indicates that the lack of an internationalized linguistic environment has become a hindering factor. Based on a detailed analysis of the current state of “Chinese-English bilingual linguistic landscapes” in Leshan, this paper also proposes recommendations for enhancing the city’s international image from the perspective of bilingual linguistic landscape construction.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, Chinese-English bilingualism, urban image, internationalization, Leshan

Introduction

Linguistic landscape (LL), as an integral component of urban landscapes and a key marker of a city’s soft power, reflects a city’s cultural essence and image. In recent years, it has garnered increasing attention and discussion across various sectors of society. As a pivotal node on the Southern Silk Road and the only city in Sichuan Province with dual UNESCO World Heritage status (both natural and cultural), Leshan is inevitably progressing toward internationalization. However, its bilingual linguistic landscape has become a weak link in constructing its international image. The study of linguistic landscapes constitutes a significant branch of sociolinguistics. The concept was first introduced by Canadian scholars Rodrigue Landry and Richard Y. Bourhis (1997), who defined it as the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs, including road signs, billboards, street names, place names, shop signs, and government building inscriptions within a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. Later, Israeli scholar, Elsa Shohamy (2009) expanded the definition to include “any written text displayed in public spaces.”

Public linguistic landscapes serve both informational and symbolic functions, providing guidance, warnings, and promotional messages. While English in linguistic landscapes may appear to target foreign visitors for practical communication, the increasing prevalence of bilingual signage also carries a strong symbolic meaning for local non-English speakers, representing qualities, such as high-end products, cosmopolitan identity, and modernity (Shang & Zhao, 2014). In recent years, research on bilingual urban linguistic landscapes has emphasized case studies and interdisciplinary approaches. However, existing research predominantly examines

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CHE Huan-huan, M.A., associate professor, School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, Leshan, China.

bilingual landscapes in cultural districts or tourist sites of megacities like Hong Kong, Beijing, and Shanghai, with few studies linking bilingual landscapes to the broader urban image construction of western international tourism cities.

The Current Situation of Bilingual Language Landscape in Leshan City

As the only natural and cultural heritage site in Sichuan Province, the scenic area of Mount Emei and Leshan Giant Buddha has seen significant improvements in the quantity and quality of its bilingual language landscape in recent years. But the current situation of the Chinese-English bilingual language landscape in Leshan's urban public spaces is far from perfect. The German functionalist translation studies school argues that translation is a purposeful activity. Therefore, translations in the urban language landscape should serve the construction of the city's image and be loyal to the target audience and the initiators of the translation. However, a large amount of Chinese-English bilingual corpus collected by the author indicates that the bilingual language landscape in Leshan's urban public spaces contributes insufficiently to the construction of Leshan's international image, mainly in the following aspects:

Lack of or Non-standard Chinese to English Translations in Public Spaces

The information function is the fundamental function of the linguistic landscape. The author interviewed several foreign nationals residing in Leshan, including international students from Leshan Normal University. They expressed that the international living environment in Leshan is not ideal. Many public spaces lack bilingual information, and the existing Chinese-English bilingual information needs further improvement in terms of standardization and accuracy. The following examples illustrate the bilingual language landscape in two representative public spaces: supermarkets and residential areas. For instance, Sanba Supermarket, which is located in various communities across Leshan. Although the supermarket has Chinese-English signs indicating the product categories in each area, some of the English translations are incorrect or not idiomatic. For example, based on the merchandise displayed on the shelves, “文玩用品” in this supermarket refers to “stationery and toys”. However, the translation “stylistic toy” likely mistranslates “文玩” as “objects with cultural value and artistic collection value”, whereas the correct translation should be “stationery & toys”. The translation of “日化用品” is “washing”. While most of the household chemicals here are indeed cleaning products, “Washing” is neither accurate nor idiomatic; it is recommended to change it to “cleaning products”. The English sign for “土特产品” is “native products”, which is an over-translation that broadens the semantic range; “Local Specialties” would be more appropriate. The translation for “针织用品” is “knitting”, which is not standardized. In fact, “Knitwear” is a more appropriate English term. In addition, the meat product section sells pork, chicken, fish, and shrimp, so using just the word “meat” is inaccurate. The English signs for the “称重处” are inconsistent, with some using “weighing” and others using “Weigh Counter”.

Multiple studies have shown that, in the context of globalization, messages delivered in English can evoke values, such as international orientation, future orientation, and success compared to the use of local languages (Xu & Lu, 2015). In recent years, newly built real estate developments in Leshan have also adopted bilingual names, which has subsequently exposed some problems. For example, the newly opened high-end villa community “绿心溪山 (Green Core Creek Hill Villa)” has an English portion that is a mechanical translation. In fact, the translation of real estate development names is similar to trademark translation, emphasizing the principle of being “concise and beautiful”; mechanical translations are the least desirable option. Additionally,

several instances of mistranslations are evident in the bilingual public signs within the community. For instance, the translation of “禁止抛物” is the bewildering “No Parabola”; the public sign in the elevator, “严禁扒门” is translated as the completely unrelated phrases “No Professional Doors”; and “私家府邸，非请勿入” is mechanically translated as “Private House. Don't Enter Without Permission”, which barely conveys the meaning but is usually expressed as “No Admittance Without Invitation” in an English context. In conclusion, the bilingual linguistic landscape construction in these real estate developments is poor.

Signage Lacks Standardization and Uniformity

A city's linguistic signage should be consistent. Based on the collected corpus, the state of standardized and unified Chinese-to-English translation in Leshan's road sign landscape is far from optimistic. Some official road signs are inconsistent; most use “Chinese + English”, while a small portion uses “Chinese + Pinyin”, such as “嘉州大道 (Jia Zhou Da Dao)”, which uses Pinyin as the English version, rendering it meaningless and unaesthetic to those who do not understand Chinese. The inconsistency in road signs can confuse foreign tourists and hinder their comprehension of information. For example, in the Shangzhongshun commercial district, “学道街 (Xuedao Street)” and “婆娑街 (Wuyan St.)” use different formats for translating “街” (street), either spelling it out or using an abbreviation, lacking a unified format. The Jiazhou Long-scroll district is not large, yet its English signage displays both simple Pinyin versions and “Jiazhou Long-scroll” versions. Inconsistent terminology is another major manifestation of the lack of standardized and unified signage. In the Jiaodingfang district, due to the presence of a ferry terminal for the Night Cruise on Three Rivers, the word “码头” (dock) appears multiple times in the linguistic landscape, but is sometimes translated as “warf” and other times as “pier”. Similarly, within Jiaoding Fang, signage related to the “大佛” (Big Buddha) alternates between “Big Buddha” and “Giant Buddha”, again lacking standardization and unity. It is worth noting that bilingual signage for food in these characteristic districts often lacks standardization and uniformity. As to the English translations for the famous Leshan cuisine “钵钵鸡”, there are as many as five different versions: “Pot Chicken”, “Bowl Chicken”, “Bobo Chicken”, “Chicken of Leshan”, and “Spicy Sichuan Skewers”. This easily misleads foreign tourists into regarding them as different food. It is recommended that the City Management Bureau unify the English name.

Signage Translation Contains Numerous Errors

In the characteristic commercial districts, translation errors on signage can be categorized into four types: spelling mistakes, Chinglish, grammatical errors, and pragmatic errors: First, spelling mistakes. For example, on some trash bins in the urban area, the text “Recycable Ltems” for “可回收垃圾” has the incorrect spelling “Ltems” which should be changed to “It”. Second, Chinglish. For instance, a featured restaurant in Jiazhou Long-scroll district “农村土菜馆” is translated as “Agricultural Museum”; the riverside warning sign “禁止嬉水” in Jiaodingfang district is translated as “Forbidding Water”; “节约用水” in public restrooms is translated as “Water Conservation”, and so on. These are all literal translations generated by the translator's Chinese thinking, which do not conform to English expression habits and language structure. Third, grammatical errors. For example, the translation of the food advertisement slogan “传统风味，回味无穷” in Shangzhongshun district, “Flavor of lead a person to endless aftertastes”, contains a misuse of the non-finite form of the verb; the promotional slogan “百味之城 (A city that offer millions of tastes)” lacks the third-person singular form of the verb. Fourth, pragmatic errors. The warning on the lawn “一花一草皆生命，一枝一叶总是情” is translated as “Each flower and blade of grass represents life, while every branch and the leaf evokes sentiment”. This translation occurs because the translator completely failed to consider the cultural differences between Chinese and English, as well as the

psychological, cultural, and aesthetic habits of the readers. Although it seems like a word-for-word translation, foreign visitors are likely to miss the intended warning function of this sentence.

Strategies for Enhancing Leshan's International Image Through Linguistic Landscape

Optimizing the linguistic environment and enhancing Leshan's international image can boost economic activities, such as tourism and commerce, strengthen the city's global competitiveness, and foster cultural exchange and integration. Measures for enhancing the city's international image from the perspective of bilingual linguistic landscape construction are provided in the following three aspects:

Collaborative Efforts

As Leshan progresses towards internationalization, its linguistic landscape, especially official signage, should cater to the needs of foreign visitors, effectively conveying information rather than solely serving Chinese speakers. The construction of linguistic landscapes follows inherent principles. The four principles proposed by Israeli sociolinguist Ben-Rafael named "self-prominence, sufficient rationality, collective identification, and power relations provide valuable guidance" (Ben-Rafael, 2009). Moreover, China issued the "English Translation and Writing Norms for Public Service Fields" in 2017, covering 13 sectors including transportation, tourism, and culture. The Leshan municipal government could establish a Chinese-English translation expert group to develop and refine norms for writing and translation within the city's linguistic landscape, ensuring unified management of language codes and information presentation on official signs. Concurrently, the government should actively promote the importance of bilingual Chinese-English signage for businesses in building an international image, providing standards and examples. Businesses need to recognize that incorrect English translations not only harm their own image, but also negatively impact Leshan's and even the nation's external image. Currently, gaps exist between official language standards and practical application. For instance, some shop signs in Leshan's characteristic districts do not adhere to the basic principle of using Pinyin for proper nouns and English for common nouns. With strengthened guidance and supervision during the approval process, such issues can be readily addressed.

Online and Offline Integration

The city's linguistic landscape encompasses not only physical signs like directional signs, street names, and notices in public spaces, but also various language phenomena in virtual online spaces (Yang, Cheng, & Liu, 2007). Leshan should construct a bilingual Chinese-English landscape across multiple dimensions, including city slogans, signage, the municipal and scenic area websites, and various new media platforms, to comprehensively enhance its international image. Particularly in the realm of new media, platforms like WeChat, TikTok, Weibo, and Bilibili can be utilized to explore and promote local characteristics. Short videos with Chinese-English subtitles hold strong appeal for young people. For example, the recently launched "Contentment AR Cultural and Creative Ice Cream" in Leshan has been very popular among young tourists. However, it is regrettable that the audio available after scanning the QR code is only in Chinese. Acutely, the story is short enough to be looped in both Chinese and English.

Blending Tradition and Modernity

Located at the intersection of the Southern Silk Road and the Yangtze River Economic Belt, Leshan is also a key city in the Chengdu Plain within the Chengdu-Chongqing City Cluster, a national strategic plan in recent years, representing a blend of tradition and modernity. In today's digitally empowered society, linguistic

landscapes integrating multimodal meaning representation methods, such as images, sounds, and colors are increasingly common, becoming a symbol of modern metropolises. It is recommended to establish digital displays, WeChat QR codes, or urban culture walls in Leshan's historic districts, airports, and high-speed rail hubs, using a bilingual Chinese-English landscape as carrier to extensively disseminate Leshan's unique regional culture and shape an international image. Dynamic signs like electronic billboards and online linguistic landscapes can offer multilingual options to cater to the diverse needs of visitors.

Conclusions

In January 2022, the CPC Central Committee and the People's Government of Shizhong District, Leshan City issued the "Implementation Opinions on Promoting the High-Quality Development of the Culture and Tourism Industry", which explicitly mentioned optimizing the construction of the linguistic landscape. Against the backdrop of major strategic initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the New Era of Western Development, and the Chengdu-Chongqing Economic Circle construction, standardizing the translation of the linguistic landscape, especially bilingual signage, holds profound practical significance.

Research and practice in bilingual linguistic landscapes can foster cultural exchange and integration between China and the rest of the world, deepen understanding and respect for foreign cultures, and contribute to building a harmonious and diverse international urban cultural environment, thereby enhancing the satisfaction of citizens and tourists. Furthermore, as Leshan's international image improves and its language environment is optimized, it will stimulate the development of economic activities, such as tourism and commerce, strengthen the city's international competitiveness, and ultimately contribute to the economic and social development of Leshan and its surrounding areas.

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