

# English in the Linguistic Landscape of the Russian-Chinese Cross Border Agglomeration

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The present article examines the role of English in shaping the linguistic landscape of the Russian-Chinese cross border agglomeration. Officials are planning to create the largest transport, logistics, and economic center on the Russian-Chinese border. Blagoveshchensk and Heihe are two neighboring cities which will be the centers of the agglomeration. The territories of both cities will see great changes and become more attractive for international tourism. The raise of the tourist flow is supposed to increase the role of English in the agglomeration. This study attempts to analyze the use of English in public signs of both cities to provide explanations for such language choice and to investigate the prospects for the language use in the linguistic landscape of the agglomeration. As a result, several groups of onyms were identified, all of them being highly exposed to tourists.

*Keywords:* agglomeration, culture, international tourism, language, linguistic landscape, multilingualism

## Introduction

Russian and Chinese officials are planning to create the largest transport, logistics, and economic center on the Russian-Chinese border. Blagoveshchensk and Heihe are two neighboring cities which will be the centers of the transborder agglomeration.

An agglomeration is defined as a global communications center generating finance resources in a number of economic spheres and service branches, creating events for a world community through the cooperation of citizens, authorities, and different communities (Arkharova & Mezhakova, 2021). So, Blagoveshchensk-Heihe agglomeration is supposed to be an integral system with specific features and functions, a territory with economically and socially knitted systems implying construction of a rationally organized transborder transportation system, development of different economic branches on the basis of close cooperation and collaboration, increase of the mutual touristic attractiveness, the raise of the incoming tourist flow (Arkharova & Mezhakova, 2021).

Blagoveshchensk-Heihe agglomeration is an example of coexistence of three very different cultures and consequently of three languages: Russian, Chinese, and English. The problem is that not many Russians as well as Chinese can speak languages of their counterparts. Taking into consideration an increasing incoming tourist flow, it is supposed that English can serve as a tool for better access to the world tourism and international understanding and it can help meet new challenges of the agglomeration (Arkharova & Mezhakova, 2021) (see also Takhtarova, Kalegina, & Yarullina, 2015, on the role of English in Paris, Berlin, and Kazan).

English is an international language and a neutral code of interaction. In the times of widening international and cross border contacts within the agglomeration, it allows communication across linguistic and cultural borders. We can trace English everywhere: going through the customs, going shopping, arriving at the airport, etc. Nowadays, the linguistic landscape of both cities is mostly formed by English. It has become the language of advertising billboards, place names, shop signs, and street names.

According to the definition given by Landry and Bourhis, linguistic landscape is seen as the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Linguistic landscape is the “visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 23). Linguistic landscape has been described as being “somewhere at the junction of sociolinguistics, sociology, social psychology, geography, and media studies” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 73). It is applied in sociolinguistics as scholars investigate the ways languages are visually used in multilingual societies.

The concept of the linguistic landscape includes all linguistic objects that characterize public environments, including but not limited to warning signs, instructions, public road signs, advertising billboards and posters, street names, graffiti, and notices on government and nongovernment buildings (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). There is no doubt that the linguistic landscape is a significant domain to examine cultural, sociopolitical, and economic changes that occur in a speech community (Alomoush, 2018). The languages used in public signs indicate what languages are locally relevant, or give evidence of what languages are becoming locally relevant (Kasanga, 2012).

Heihe and Blagoveschensk are unique cities with strategic geographical locations. The study attempts to investigate the linguistic landscape of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk. The English language influence on Chinese cities linguistic landscape has become remarkable, heralding the era of English in the Chinese language and culture and is widely discussed by linguists. With China’s integration into the global economy, bilingual and multilingual signs are becoming more and more common and can be seen in many Chinese cities (Guo & Li, 2017). Heihe is not an exception. As a Russian citizen and Blagoveshchensk resident, I observe the same trend in Russia and, particularly, in my home city of Blagoveshchensk. According to David Crystal, English is popular and attractive because it symbolizes wealth and prestige (Crystal, 2003). The hypothesis of this paper (based on literature analysis and my personal experience) is that in both cities, in the places highly exposed to tourists, English names are used as an attracting technique to indicate prestige, high status, commercial success and excellence. To prove the hypothesis, a study of onyms in Heihe and Blagoveshchensk was carried out.

## **Experiment**

In the course of study, different signs, billboards, street, and place names in Blagoveshchensk and Heihe were selected using continuous sampling method. The photos of different public signs were taken by the author of this research in Blagoveschensk and in Heihe. Among 200 collected onyms, about 100 (45 in Heihe and 50 in Blagoveschensk) names were identified as English or containing English words. The collected data were further processed using classification method and pragmatic analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

The obtained results show that although a significant number of signs in the city are monolingual and use Chinese, there is a considerable amount of English-Chinese bilingual signs as well as English monolingual signs.

The identified onyms were classified into seven groups: shop names, bank names, company names, hotel names, bars and restaurant names, street names, and advertising billboards.

English is becoming the language of choice for shop owners as it can make the shop look trendy and leave customers with the impressions of internationalism and globalism (Guo & Li, 2017). In Heihe, such shop signs as Fair Whale, Oppo, Golden Sun, Ariose, Lina Cosmetics, Cosmo Lady, Street Cowboy, etc., use English as it helps establish a good image. Below, examples of commercial signs from other groups that also use English are provided:

- bank names: China Mobile, Postal Savings Bank of China, Heihe Rural Commercial Bank, Bank of China, China Construction Bank;
- company names: Heihe Huibang Economic and Trade Co., Ltd., Heihe Xinlong Economy and Trade Co., Ltd., Heihe Xinxiang Jewelry Trading Co., Ltd., Heihe Hexing Agricultural Products Acquisition Co., Ltd., Heihe Tongshun Telecommunication Equipment Co., Ltd.;
- hotels: Huayuan Business Hotel, Hanting Hotel, Heihe International Hotel, Home Inn Selected, Hawaii International Business Hotel, European Style Holiday Hotel;
- bars and restaurants names: Heihe International Western Restaurant, Club Bar, Heihe Restaurant Food Department, Jiahe Fast Food, Snack Xiaohe, Small Profits Restaurant;
- advertising billboards and street names: Wenhua Street, Central Street, Longke Street, Xinhua Street, Hailan street.

The data analysis demonstrates that in Heihe, English monolingual signs are becoming more and more widely spread. Nowadays in China, English has become a symbol of social prestige and status, and the guarantee of commercial success and excellence. Accordingly, English constitutes an essential component of the linguistic landscape of the city.

As for Blagoveschensk linguistic landscape, there are also a lot of signs in English as it plays the dominant role and is employed in shop signs (Womens' Boutique, Fresh Market, Family, Bestseller, Home Sweet Home), place names (Hawaii, Barber Shop, Daddy's Pub, Jigger Pony, Harat's Irish Pub, Royal, Bestseller, Hawaii, Asia Hotel) and street names (Lenina Street, Frunze Str., Zeiskaya Str.). More and more companies opt for English in their names and logos to attract customers and to enter the global competition: SmartDom, Blagway, Asia Trade, ALG Soft, Color, GTD, QuestQuest, etc.

### **Conclusion**

The study showed that the agglomeration development leads to more frequent use of English as its mediatory role cannot be underestimated. In the era of globalization, commitment to the native language and culture can hardly compete with the necessity to enter the world of international communication and, thus, the need to maintain a productive dialogue with the help of the global language. The use of English in advertising, trade, business, and everyday life in the Russian-Chinese agglomeration is unavoidable. Incoming tourist flow encourages the use of English as a universal communication tool. It was proven by a considerable number of onyms containing English of being totally English and by a variety of spheres they were found in.

The number of English signs and place names on both bordering territories appears to show a growing tendency to meet the demand of local residents and visitors. The outlook for further study might include changes in number of such onyms and in their structure concerning bilingual vs. monolingual and the spheres of usage during a longer time period.

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