



The roles of English in the linguistic landscape

Research Article

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Cite this article: Nambu S (2024). English signage shaping Tokyo's mosaic cityscape. *English Today* 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078424000142>

Keywords: linguistic landscape; English signage; wasei-eigo; Englishization; Tokyo's cityscape

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Abstract

Through the analysis of English in the linguistic landscape (LL) of Tokyo, this article demonstrates the diverse functions of English on signage and argues that the use of English in different areas of Tokyo mirrors the distinct socioeconomic characteristics of each area, aiming to highlight how English contributes to shaping the multifaceted Tokyo's cityscape. This study specifically contrasts the three areas: Asakusa and Tsukiji, Shibuya, and Roppongi and Azabu. The data consists of photographed signs, supplemented with fieldnotes, obtained from fieldwork in 2023. Considering all the aspects of the observed signs, the diverse English use on signage can be viewed as a manifestation of its proliferation and localisation as a global language, adapting to a diverse audience, including Japanese locals, visitors from overseas, and local foreign residents. As a result of such manifestation, along with the varied functions and interplay with social contexts, the aggregate of English signs of each area collectively crafts the complexity of Tokyo's mosaic cityscape.

Introduction

While one of the intriguing aspects of research on contemporary English revolves around the diversity of its speakers, including native speakers, non-native speakers, and speakers across all varieties of English as represented by the term “World Englishes” (Kirkpatrick 2021), another fascinating aspect, as the focus of this article, is the range of functions that English can serve. In the field of linguistic landscape research (Gorter and Cenoz 2023), which examines the use of languages on public signage, functions of language on signage can be categorised into two types based on goals of communication via signs: informational and symbolic. A typical example of informational signage is traffic signs, where English is used to convey the message stated on the sign. In contrast, English on signage used for symbolic purposes typically signifies modernity and cosmopolitanism, especially among non-English readers in regions where English is not the primary language (Piller 2003; Backhaus 2006). In this symbolic role, English is often employed on signage for its decorative appeal, which may jointly appear with languages spoken in the region to convey the actual information. The use of English for informational or symbolic purposes is greatly influenced by social contexts, especially in non-English speaking societies, such as the English user (who installed the sign), the target audience, as well as how English is localised and embedded linguistically and culturally within the society (Seargeant 2011b). Through the analysis of English in the linguistic landscape (LL) of Tokyo, this article demonstrates the diverse functions of English on signage and argues that the use of English in different areas of Tokyo mirrors the distinct socioeconomic characteristics of each area, aiming to highlight how English contributes to shaping Tokyo's multifaceted cityscape.

As an essential background for understanding English usage in the LL, let me first provide a brief overview of the characteristics of English users and potential target audiences of English signs in Japan. Japan has been considered a non-English speaking country and, in the Kachruvian model, is classified as part of the Expanding Circle, as opposed to the Inner and Outer Circles (Borlongan and Ishikawa 2021). In Japan, the majority of the population is primarily exposed to English through formal education, rather than everyday communication (Seargeant 2011a). Regarding the English proficiency of Japanese, Terasawa (2015) noted a unique feature in Japan compared to other countries; the relative uniformity of English proficiency across various social groups, including different age groups and social statuses. He reported that while the proportion of Japanese with high proficiency is not comparatively high, the majority possess

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basic reading literacy even if not sufficient for fluent communication. As will be discussed below, this characteristic is considered foundational for the abundant use of English in the LL of Japan. Regarding foreign residents in Japan, according to the Immigration Services Agency, the total number reached 3 million in 2022, which constitutes 2.4% of the overall population of 125 million, an increase of one million since 2012. Additionally, with the Japanese government's policy aimed at promoting the country as a global tourist destination, the number of foreign visitors and tourists increased radically; according to the Japan Tourism Statistics, the number increased approximately five times until the COVID-19 pandemic (from 6.8 million in 2009 to 31.9 million in 2019). This increase, of course, includes not only native English speakers but also users of English as a *lingua franca*.

English speakers in Japan constitute the primary target audience of English signs for informational purposes in the LL. For example, in Tokyo, the guidelines on language use for signage by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government recommends English to be included, reflecting the number of foreign residents and tourists in the city (Backhaus 2009). While the government's emphasis on English plays a significant role in the spread of English in the LL, this alone does not provide a complete explanation. Through a quantitative analysis of languages on signs in Tokyo, Backhaus (2006) revealed that English was in fact more predominant than Japanese (97.6% vs. 72.1%, both include non-monolingual signs). However, this does not imply more English speakers than Japanese speakers in Japan, since not all English signs are necessarily intended for English speakers; especially when English on signs serves a symbolic function, it may target non-English speakers, including those with basic reading skills but limited comprehension (Backhaus 2006; Seargeant 2011b). In this aspect of English use in Japan, Seargeant (2011b) pointed out a perceived paradox: “[i]f people who have a working knowledge of English are in a marked minority, why then is there so much use of English in the public sphere?” This discrepancy is indicative of the symbolic function of English in Japan, playing a key role in shaping the LL while providing insights into how English is culturally and linguistically embedded in the society.

This article compares different areas of Tokyo to explore the diverse roles of English signage catering to various audiences that reflect the distinctive socioeconomic characteristics of each area. As the capital of Japan and a major cosmopolitan city, Tokyo encompasses diverse sociocultural and economic aspects, each contributing to uniquely characterising different areas of the city (Keet and Manabe 2016). This study specifically contrasts the following three areas: Asakusa and Tsukiji, Shibuya, and Roppongi and Azabu. Asakusa and Tsukiji are known for their traditional ambience with temples and markets and as popular tourist destinations among both Japanese and visitors from overseas. Shibuya is renowned as a fashion and shopping hub among Japanese locals, attracting a diverse range of clientele, from those seeking casual fashion to high-end brands. Roppongi and Azabu have a reputation for their international atmosphere with the presence of embassies,

international companies and upscale residential options, known as popular areas among foreign business professionals.

This study does not include a comparative analysis of the status of English among the local governments of these areas. While the focus of this study is the diverse functions of English, English signs installed by the governments, such as traffic signs and evacuation signs, primarily target an English-speaking audience, leading to a consistent use of English for informational purposes. Regarding the language choice for signage by the governments, these areas adhere to the sign guidelines of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, which recommends including English, resulting in less variation in the use of English across the areas. Additionally, according to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (<https://www.soumu.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/>), as of October 2023, the ratio of foreign residents to the total population is similar across the areas, falling approximately within 5–8%. Therefore, instead of centring the discussion on language choices at the government level and demographic influences, this study focuses on socioeconomic factors of each area in the analysis of English usage in the LL.

In Japan, delimiting what constitutes English is not straightforward. Alongside English words written in the Roman alphabet, there is English written in Japanese katakana script, as well as English loanwords (e.g. ミシン [*mishin*] for “sewing machine” derived from “machine”) and *wasei-eigo* “Japan-made English” (e.g. サラリーマン [*sararii-man*] literally “salary man” but used to mean “office worker”) (Stanlaw 2004) as part of the Japanese vocabulary, and these may also be perceived as English by Japanese locals (Seargeant 2011b; Rowland 2016). Given that using Japanese scripts limits the audience to Japanese readers, regardless of whether it is perceived as English by them, this study focuses on English, including *wasei-eigo*, written in Roman script.

The fieldwork was conducted in the three areas in 2023. The data consists of photographed signs, supplemented with fieldnotes. Regarding store signs, to better understand their target audience, the language use on their websites was also examined when necessary. A qualitative approach was employed to facilitate the consideration of social contexts surrounding the use of English in each area. This approach allows for nuanced comparisons among the different functions of English and across the different areas in Tokyo, contrasting with a quantitative approach that typically involves counting frequencies of each language on signs to discuss power relations and status of languages in a given area, topics not the focus of the current study.

In what follows, I will present examples of English signs from each area and analyse their different characteristics, aiming to demonstrate how the aggregate of English signs in each area contributes to the mosaic-like nature of Tokyo's urban landscape.

Asakusa and Tsukiji

The LL of Asakusa and Tsukiji features occasional use of English for informational purposes aimed at English-speaking

tourists from overseas. Asakusa, a historical area, centres around Sensōji temple with its vibrant main street that host numerous souvenir stores and has been known as a traditional cultural centre. Tsukiji was once renowned as the largest seafood wholesale market in Japan, appealing to intermediaries and buyers from across the nation, until its relocation to Toyosu in 2018. It remains a vibrant hub with its diverse array of seafood stores and restaurants, particularly those serving sushi with fresh seafood.

Against this backdrop, in the cultural and historical ambience of Asakusa and Tsukiji, the presence of English in the LL is not prominent compared to the other areas in this study. However, with the recent increase in tourists from overseas, the LL of the area has adapted to accommodate their needs by including English on signs. Due to the nature of the businesses in the area being culturally and historically linked to Japanese authenticity, which is a major draw in global tourism, the use of English on signs is primarily informational rather than serving as a symbolic representation of modernization and cosmopolitanism. Therefore, English is typically found on small signs, including those with sentences conveying information, rather than on large signs with words or short phrases designed for their symbolic appeal.

Around the Sensōji temple area in Asakusa, many Japanese-English bilingual signs were found, providing explanations about elements associated with the temple, such as statues (Figure 1). These signs are installed by public authorities, who have access to the resources required for English translation services. On the other hand, signs at individual souvenir stores are mostly monolingual Japanese, indicating that tourists from overseas, unless proficient in Japanese, might need to rely on guesswork or communicate with store owners to understand the products and services. However, English signs can also be found sporadically at their store



Figure 2. Handcrafted English signs in Tsukiji.



Figure 3. Handcrafted English signs in Asakusa.

fronts, as shown in Figure 2. Among these English signs handcrafted by the individuals, you might notice some English errors, as shown in Figure 3, which displays “Do hot go” (intended to be “Do not enter”, according to the corresponding Japanese text above it). This article’s focus is not on

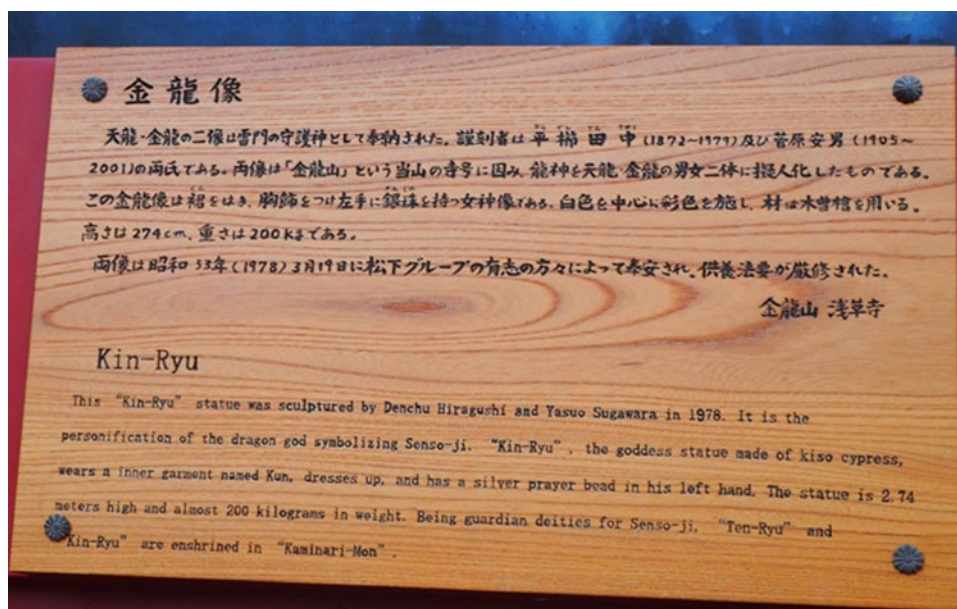


Figure 1. Bilingual Japanese-English sign explaining the statue in Asakusa.

highlighting these errors themselves, but rather on shedding light on the level of English proficiency among those engaged in traditional business; their proficiency is sufficient to create messages in English when the occasion arises, even though some errors may be present. This aligns with Terasawa's (2015) report that the majority of Japanese, across various backgrounds, possess some level of English skills. During the fieldwork, I also witnessed some store owners attempting brief conversations in English with their customers from overseas. To illustrate with one example, one store owner managed to ask "Where are you from?" in English but struggled to understand the customer's response "Greece" since in Japanese, it is pronounced "girisha".

In addition to the value of individuals' English proficiency for communicating with customers, these examples highlight the store owners' genuine hospitality and efforts for visitors from overseas. Doering and Kishi (2022) emphasise this aspect of hospitality through English signage. At a sightseeing site in Chikatsuyu village in Japan, they observed an English sign "What your head!" (intended to be "watch your head") at a store entrance placed by the store owner to warn their customers. From this example, they conclude, "'Effective' communication of hospitality may actually take the form of 'affective' imperfection" (Doering and Kishi 2022, 138). When surrounded by monolingual Japanese signs, overseas tourists may genuinely appreciate such efforts made by store owners to accommodate their needs, even with some English errors.

Shibuya

In the LL of Shibuya, English is prominently used for symbolic and decorative purposes, primarily targeting Japanese locals. As Shibuya's central shopping districts cater to those in pursuit of the latest trends, from casual fashion to high-end brands, English signage is abundant in the LL. This is particularly evident around Omotesandō street and its surrounding side streets, where brand stores dominate, with the presence of English signage more prominent than Japanese. The use of English includes those for brand names, products, and names of companies originating from English-speaking countries, such as "Tiffany & Co." and "Ralph Lauren". These represent examples of



Figure 4. Monolingual English sign at a candy store in Shibuya.

"decontextualized semiotics" (Scollon and Scollon 2003, 145), as their signs appear in a consistent manner across various regions.

The use of English in Shibuya, along with the overall cityscape, is highly contrastive to that of Asakusa and Tsukiji. Since this area mainly attracts Japanese locals instead of overseas tourists, English signage in Shibuya tends to be symbolic rather than informational, that is, it mainly caters to a Japanese audience, including those who do not read English. In addition to signs for globally recognised brand stores, English signs at the storefronts of those originating from Japan are also prominent. Contrasting with the informational use of English in Asakusa and Tsukiji, English used for symbolic and decorative purposes in Shibuya is typically found as words and phrases, rather than sentences, and tends to appear on large signs. For example, the storefront of the candy store in Figure 4 is entirely in English with its name "Candy Show Time" alongside the store's theme "original handmade candy". Its window and door also display English, but only in simple words and phrases, not in sentences. This type of English use does not necessarily indicate that the store's primary target is English-speaking international audiences. Rather, the use of English is symbolic, aiming to imbue the store with a modern and foreign ambience, primarily targeting Japanese customers. This is evidenced by the store's location in a non-tourist area and its website, which presents all the content and information in Japanese, whereas English is more for decorative purposes (<https://candy-showtime.com/>, accessed on 20 December, 2023).

Another example from Shibuya is a hair salon, as shown in Figure 5. The name of the salon displayed on the right of the entrance and the price list on a board in the bottom left are exclusively in English. Writing the price list in English is a quite common stylistic choice among Japanese hair salons, especially those targeting a young Japanese clientele. As discussed earlier, the majority of the Japanese can read basic English, sufficient for understanding price lists. This suggests that English signs do not necessarily target only an English-speaking audience; instead, their target audience depends on the social context of the sign. The door in Figure 5 displays the store's concept in English. Although it includes sentences, which requires more than basic English skills compared to reading the price list, the context surrounding this English use indicates that it primarily serves symbolic and decorative purposes. For instance,



Figure 5. Monolingual English at the storefront of a hair salon in Shibuya.



Figure 6. English on a sign at an idol goods and tickets store in Shibuya.

their website contains essential information exclusively in Japanese, with English primarily used for decorative purposes (<http://www.hmglamour.jp/>, accessed on 20 December, 2023). The price list on the website is also suggestive of their primary target customers; while English is used for simple words such as “cut”, Japanese is used for words such as “treatments”, which would be more difficult for Japanese customers to read if given in English. Another notable feature on their website is the use of the phrase “hair make” (meaning “hair styling” or “hair design”) as part of their logo. This phrase is *wasei-eigo* (Japan-made English), often used by Japanese hair salons in their branding, particularly those that specialise in modern hairstyles. These observations indicate that the use of English is primarily symbolic, targeting mainly a Japanese clientele instead of a broad English audience. A relevant example of such a unique English usage was found on the sign for the store that sells idol goods and tickets, as shown in Figure 6. Instead of displaying the typical pair of words “open” and “closed” for their opening hours, the sign uses a less common pairing of “open” and “last”. Given the context, such as other information on the sign exclusively in Japanese and their primary customers being Japanese fandom, this English use appears to serve a symbolic and decorative purpose. Along with the phrase “hair make” in the above example, this type of creative word formation may be viewed as a case of Englishization (Kachru 2005) of Japanese, since these words, often written in Japanese katakana script, have become part of the Japanese vocabulary. However, given the social contexts of

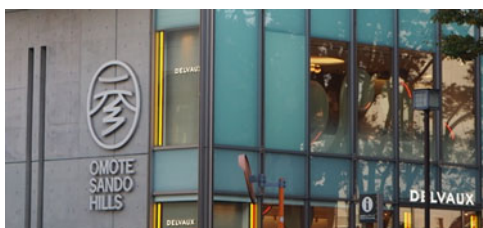


Figure 7. English sign with a logo with a Japanese kanji character in Shibuya.

these examples, their primary function is not informational, but rather to convey a sense of modernity, signalling a business inclination towards contemporary trends in contrast to traditional Japanese style.

One of the notable English signs in Shibuya is the large logo in English “Omotesando Hills”, as shown in Figure 7. This logo is for the building complex that houses a luxury shopping mall and upscale residential units on Omotesandō street. Instead of displaying its Japanese counterpart for the English text, the logo incorporates the Japanese kanji character “参” from “表参道” (*Omotesandou*), used as an iconic element. Within the social context of the sign, the absence of corresponding Japanese text does not imply that the sign is exclusively intended for an English-speaking international audience. Instead, the prominent use of English in the logo can be interpreted as symbolic, representing the predominant function of English usage in this area and assisting in branding the area alongside the upscale brand flagship stores lining the street.

Roppongi and Azabu

The LL of Roppongi and Azabu is characterised by the use of English for informational purposes, targeting local foreign residents, such as signs in monolingual English or with English being most prominent rather than Japanese. The presence of a U.S. military base in Roppongi since the post-war period has influenced its cityscape reflecting the need for English at stores and bars catering to English speakers. Other than local restaurants, American chain stores that can only be found in limited areas across Japan, such as “Cinnabon”, “Seattle’s Best Coffee”, and “Hard Rock Cafe”, are also present in Roppongi. Moreover, the existence of numerous embassies in Roppongi and Azabu contributes to English widely used as a lingua franca in this area. Therefore, unlike Asakusa and Tsukiji, the use of English for the local foreign resident population is commonly observed. The presence of English is prominent across the area, yet unlike Shibuya, its function is more informational, although it might also be perceived as symbolic by Japanese



Figure 8. Monolingual English sign at a restaurant in Roppongi.



Figure 9. Bilingual English-Japanese sign at a grocery store in Azabu.

locals, depending on their understanding of English and the specific social context (Leeman and Modan 2009).

In Roppongi and Azabu, there are restaurants that serve international customers beyond just the Japanese. For example, the Israeli chain restaurant in Roppongi in Figure 8 caters specifically to vegans, with all signs, menus, and other information in English, supplemented with sporadic Japanese text in a smaller font. In this context, their use of English primarily serves an informational purpose targeting an international audience, including Israelis seeking authentic Israeli food. However, the English use might also be perceived as symbolic, particularly by Japanese locals seeking an exotic experience in the area with the international ambience.

Another example is the storefront of the upscale grocery store “National Azabu”, which offers foods, ingredients, and

various daily items from different countries to cater to the needs of foreign residents in the area, including embassy staff and expatriates. At the storefront, most signs are bilingual English-Japanese with a prominence on English. The sign in Figure 9 provides information about their parking fees. Not only is English more prominent than Japanese, with a larger font and positioned above the Japanese text, but the English sentences also provide more detailed information than Japanese, indicating their primary focus on an English-speaking clientele. Quite unusually, this grocery store offers valet parking, which is often filled with luxury cars, further suggesting the target audience of the English signs.

Located near the grocery store, as shown in Figure 10, is a hair salon named “One World”, written on a sign with its theme “international hair salon” exclusively in English. Moreover, the statement “English available” on their sign clearly indicates that they target an international audience, including foreign residents in this area. While the exclusive use of English on this sign may appear similar to the hair salon found in Shibuya in Figure 5, the functions of English are different. Whereas the use of English in Figure 5 is symbolic and decorative, English in Figure 10 is primarily informational. This is also evident from their website (<https://www.one-world.info/>, accessed on 20 December, 2023), which contains extensive information in both Japanese and English. This contrasts with the website of the hair salon in Shibuya, where English is used solely for decorative purposes.

Conclusion

This article has focused on a comparative snapshot of the use of English in signage across the different areas of Tokyo, exploring the diverse functions of English in achieving various goals of communication with the readers while accommodating different social contexts. The findings particularly illuminate how such English usage reflects the distinctive socioeconomic characteristics of each area. The observed signs in Asakusa and Tsukiji, with the traditional ambience, feature English primarily used for informational purposes, targeting visitors from overseas who do not speak Japanese. Shibuya, as the epicentre of fashion and shopping, is characterised by the symbolic and decorative use of English on signage, aimed at Japanese locals and contributing to branding the area. The LL of Roppongi and Azabu features English signs providing information that caters to the local foreign residents. The analysis further uncovered that the basic English proficiency among the majority of Japanese is a key factor behind the varied use of English in signage. This is evident in the handcrafted signs in Asakusa and Tsukiji, suggesting that individuals in traditional businesses possess English skills sufficient to create signs with the intent of hospitality. The unique English usage as *wasei-eigo* (Japan-made English) in Shibuya’s examples illustrates a case of Englishization of Japanese, demonstrating how English is integrated into Japanese, both linguistically and culturally. Considering all the aspects of the observed signs, the diverse English use on signage can

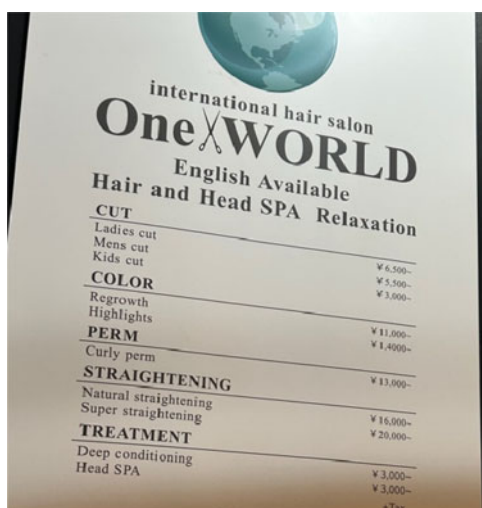


Figure 10. Monolingual English sign at a hair salon in Azabu.

be viewed as a manifestation of its proliferation and localisation as a global language, adapting to the diverse audience, including Japanese locals, visitors from overseas, and local foreign residents. As a result of such manifestation, along with the varied functions and interplay with social contexts, the aggregate of English signs of each area collectively crafts the complexity of Tokyo's mosaic cityscape.

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