

# The Linguistic Landscape of Restaurant Menus

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## Abstract

Restaurants are common services in many communities worldwide and, as such, are sites where language use can be observed in relation to the communities that they serve. Menus for restaurants are frequently displayed both outdoors as well as indoors, which makes them useful for linguistic landscape analysis. Additionally, the way that languages are used on menus can have effects on patrons depending upon how tolerant they are of incomplete comprehension. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, dessert menus for 4 chain 'family' restaurants were taken from online search results and analysed for language use. Differences in the length of dish names, noun modification and ideophones were found and are discussed in relation to meaning and how different languages are used and meaning is constructed.

## Keywords

Food, ideophones, linguistic landscape, restaurant, noun modification

## INTRODUCTION

In many communities worldwide, there are restaurants. As with the communities themselves, the languages restaurants use also vary. In fact, restaurants may exhibit wider linguistic practices than the communities they serve. For example, restaurants may use languages for display purposes, in order to gain association with an authenticity in cuisines associated with a particular region or nation. One particular use of language that is relatively consistent and comparable across restaurants is menus. Menus are often displayed outside restaurants as well as at the tables within, and thus may be considered to form part of the linguistic landscape (LL). LL analysis would therefore appear to be a useful approach to assessing and evaluating restaurants' use of languages. One benefit of LL analysis as an approach is that it seems to be predisposed to multidisciplinary study. In this study LL is used to examine the real, situated,

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language use experience as in applied linguistics, to examine the connotations and signifiers of language as in semiotics, and to consider the relations between culture, consumption and consumer as would be the case in sociology.

LL analysis is an approach to investigate the language use in an environment that may make use of qualitative and/or quantitative methods. Landry and Bourhis (1997) provided a greater popularity to the approach, though its origins may be seen in Masai (1969). Backhaus (2007) follows a similar approach to that of Masai (1969), in that the focus of his study was signs in Tokyo's urban areas, but has a broader theoretical framework, particularly his notion of "monophonic" and "polyphonic" signs (see pp. 90-103 for details), that is, how only one language, or two or more languages are used simultaneously in the same sign respectively, and how they convey their messages.

In examining LL research related to the food and drink service industry, both Masai (1969) and Backhaus (2007) included restaurant signs in Tokyo in their data. The notion of monophonic, mixed, polyphonic and monolingual signs (Backhaus, 2007) can and arguably should be applied to menus because they are not only indoor items but are frequently displayed outside the premises or are mounted on the walls adjacent to the entrance. Additionally, Chesnut and Curran (2020) worked on cafe menus in Seoul neighbourhoods and examined the use of English, Korean and other languages in relation to socioeconomic status. As such, because menus are an expected part of the restaurant's linguistic topography, they can therefore provide telling information about the cultural terrain, for example, linguistic register and therefore target clientele. However, thus far, menus have received little attention in the communications literature.

The LL we consider should not be limited to the language that we see used outdoors, written large to be seen in public spaces, but also the features that we are likely to experience indoors. To go beyond Masai's (1969) original metaphor of the linguistic *landscape*, perhaps we should consider topographies. Much like the geologist considers caves, stalactites, stalagmites and aquifers, we should consider the types of discourse and signs that would be typically found in service establishments, for example. Chesnut and Curran (2020) state that LL research could be done without focusing on the large immovable objects in the environment such as signs and billboards, but may examine smaller, more ephemeral items such as tote bags. Therefore using menus as LL research sites is a viable choice.

Blommaert and Maly (2019) commented that references to online resources are available in the offline LL, examples being URLs and social media usernames in advertisements. However, we posit that the reverse is also true: offline references are given in the online LL, because the online LL functions frequently as an appendix to the offline sphere. Signs are not only used in

physical space, but increasingly on the internet. Discourse in English regarding internet use is done by means of language commonly used to talk about locations. We 'go on' the internet, 'visit' websites, 'arrive at' and 'leave' pages and 'navigate' around what is frequently referred to as a 'digital space'. However, the use of the internet with near ubiquitous mobile devices also provides affordances for people to find out more about establishments such as restaurants prior to entry. This can facilitate smoother customer service experiences through advance access to information such as menus and descriptions of service by both restaurateurs and consumers (see, for example, Namkung, Shin & Yang, 2007). Through this mixture of the physical and the virtual, an interesting interaction between people and places occur, almost a reversal of 'showrooming' (Balakrishnan, Sundaresan & Zhang, 2014); in 'showrooming', a visitor to a physical space searches for product information on their mobile device, and has access to a physical product, to better inform their purchase at an online retailer, often a direct competitor of the physical retailer. However, in the use of prior online information for restaurants information sources often conflict but through online but informed by prior experiences of different patrons leaving their comments, or by restaurateurs and patrons uploading menu and dish pictures to websites, a collection of evidence is constructed, leading to a decision whether to patronise a particular restaurant.

Choi (2018) found that restaurant patrons with a low need for cognitive closure (tolerant of not fully understanding) respond positively to menus written in the authentic (non-English) language, whereas their counterparts with high need for cognitive closure (need to fully understand) respond negatively. This is mitigated in the menus examined in the current study through the use of multilingualism and a large number of high-quality photographs illustrating all of the dishes offered for sale. However, Karrebæk et al. (2018) note that the language on the menu is just one part of the meaning-making in our relationship with food and restaurants. As van Leeuwen (2022) points out, colour, illustrations and typography all contribute to a text's meaning, interacting in the communication. Colours and colour combinations can connote flavours, national cuisines and even freshness of food. Illustrations can show ideal presentations, including ingredients and therefore even allow prediction of flavours and textures of the dishes. Typography can connote a level of sophistication, refinement and quality that the restaurant wishes to convey to its clientele depending upon the typeface used. This mixture of modalities is, above all, used to persuade patrons to purchase dishes and, as van Leeuwen (2022) comments:

In today's multicultural societies we again import (and adapt, or fuse with other provenances) the cuisines, musics and fashions of other cultures into global consumer culture in ways which often have little to do with what they mean or meant in the cultures from which they came.

(p. 49).

The register of language used on menus is an indicator of the social strata of the target

market. It may also be argued that when a neutral register, which is highly accommodating, is used to appeal to a broad customer base. When certain foods previously unavailable or exoticised are made available, it is not only the food but the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that is being sold along with it. After price is also factored in, there is a de-stratification attempt, in which the exclusive, expensive luxury item, a dish that in its authentic form requires international travel, is made into a mass market item. However, while it is obvious that an exoticised item sold at a mass-market chain restaurant is no longer an exclusive item, language can be used to maintain semiotic connections with its origin and other aspects of luxury.

That is, all culture is available for commodification. In the process of commodification, consumers pay for the cultural experience, and a simulation of authenticity may fetch higher prices than an experience which lacks any provision of authenticity. This appears to be important in the restaurant industry, where customer experience and perceived authenticity are intangible commodities offered for sale. For example, McCall and Lynn's (2008) study of restaurant menus found that "More complex terminology increased perceptions of quality, likely choice, and pricing expectations. The presence or absence of a pricing anchor did little to alter these findings" (p. 44). With this perceived authenticity being a marketed quality, the research questions investigated were as follows:

1. What languages are used on the menus of common family restaurant chains in Japan?
2. How are these languages used to communicate aspects of the dishes and restaurants?

## Methodology

Data was collected online from restaurant websites, which were selected because they are well-known mainstays of many Japanese neighbourhoods. Saizeriya is a popular Italian restaurant chain; Bamiyan is a well-known Chinese chain restaurant; Jonathan's, and Coco's are 'family restaurants' which have menus consisting of Japanese and western/American cuisine. They are present not only in the central Kanto area but also throughout Japan and their menus are easily accessible, often through take out services, or through Google Images. The data were examined and coded for script and language use by the first three authors.

## Coding

The method of deciding the languages used were determined by either script usage (such as the difference in characters between Japanese *kanji* and Chinese *hanzi*, or the difference between Japanese and Roman script without Japanese moraic spelling patterns). However, in the case of restaurants using roman script in their menus, if the language item matched the cuisine (e.g. Italian at the Italian restaurant Saizeriya) then it was coded as such. Additionally if it was

debatable which language a word belonged to, the first three authors discussed in order to reach a final decision. While orthography identifiable as Chinese *hanzi* was visible in the Jonathan's menu, it is not subject to analysis due to poor legibility due to limited image resolution. This will be discussed further in the limitations section.

## Findings

The data collected are presented in a tabulated form in Table 1. Clearly Japanese is used frequently in all of the menus, with English the second most frequent language and Chinese the third most frequent. In both instances of Chinese use, the menus belong to restaurants owned by the Skylark group.

Table 1: Collected Data

Restaurant	Dish name	Languages used
Saizeriya	カシスとブルーベリーのパンナコッタ Panna cotta with "Cassis" & Blueberry Sauce	Japanese
	イタリアンジェラート Italian Gelato	English
	ティラミスクラシコ Tiramisu	Italian
	すっきりレモンのシャーベット Lemon sorbet	
	カップチーノ (アイスクーキ) Cappuccino	
	とろけるティラミス&コーヒーゼリー Coffee Jelly with Tiramisu	
	プリントティラミスクラシコの盛合せ Tiramisu Italian custard & pudding	
Bamiyan	果肉レモンのオーギョージ Lemon flavoured aiyu (fig seed) jelly 檸檬愛玉冰	Japanese
	とろとろ白桃とアンインのアイス添え White peach on almond tofu with ice cream 白桃杏仁豆腐配冰淇淋	English
	ハチミツ揚げパン バニラ添え Fried sweet bread with honey, w/ vanilla ice cream 蜂蜜油条配香草冰淇淋	Chinese
	黒蜜きなこ揚げパン バニラアイス添え Fried Chinese breadstick with brown sugar syrup and served with vanilla ice cream 黑蜜黄豆粉炸面包 配香草冰淇淋	

Jonathan's	<p>プチスイーツ Petit sweets</p> <p>じっくり漬け込んだふわとろフレンチトースト Soft and fluffy French Toast</p> <p>抹茶ティラミスたっぷりフルーツ IN Tiramisu of MATCHA with a variety of fruits</p> <p>パンケーキ Pancakes</p> <p>クラシックショコラ</p> <p>アサイヨーグルトボール</p> <p>バニラアイス Vanilla ice cream</p> <p>チョコレートアイス Chocolate ice cream</p> <p>コーヒーゼリーのミニサンデー Mini sundae of coffee jelly</p> <p>黒ごまと白玉のミニサンデー Mini sundae of sesame and dumpling</p> <p>フルーツヨーグルトのミニサンデー Mini sundae of fruits and yoghurt</p> <p>抹茶とあずきのミニサンデー Mini sundae of with MATCHA bavarois and sweetened azuki</p> <p>フルーツヨーグルトパフェ</p> <p>クラシックショコラパフェ</p> <p>焼きたてデニッシュソフトクリーム添え Hot danish with soft ice cream</p> <p>甘味 Japanese sweets</p> <p>抹茶わらびもちソフト 抹茶&amp;黒蜜つき Bracken starch dumpling (MATCHA taste) with soft ice cream</p> <p>いちごのクリームあんみつ 抹茶&amp;黒蜜つき ANMITSU with vanilla ice cream and strawberries</p> <p>いちごのソフトあんみつ 抹茶&amp;黒蜜つき ANMITSU with soft ice cream and strawberries</p> <p>もちりつるん! タピオカミルク 抹茶 Tapioca milk (MATCHA taste)</p> <p>もちりつるん! タピオカミルク コーヒー Tapioca milk (Coffee taste)</p>	<p>Japanese</p> <p>English</p> <p>French</p>
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Coco's	バナナクレープ Banana crepe	Japanese
	パフェ Parfait	English
	宇治抹茶プリンの和風ミニぱるふえ Japanese style Parfait with Green Tea Pudding	French
	ベルギーチョコブラウニーのパルフェ Chocolate Brownie Parfait	

Despite the use of words in languages other than English, Japanese and Chinese, it appears that words appearing in menus in French and Italian are used less as strong signifiers for menu readers but as more arbitrary signifiers that suggest the restaurants have a technical expertise with European culinary traditions. Such usage seems to be aimed at developing a kind of prestige for the restaurants in spite of their market position as affordable family restaurants. The lexis used in French and Italian is highly familiar to Japanese speakers, often used as loan words in a range of advertising contexts or as the norm in restaurant language.

In contrast to the use of French and Italian as ornamental markers of technical authenticity, the use of Chinese in the Bamiyan menu is more authentic and communicative. This may be due to the fact that there are a greater number of L1 and heritage Chinese users in Japan than the number of French and Italian users. That is not to say that the Chinese use is not ornamental, but that its sole use is not simply ornamental but it is also used in a communicative way. However, there is also Chinese present on the Jonathan's menu, which suggests that there is less systematic authenticity in the Bamiyan menu but more shrewd market awareness on the part of the parent company Skylark, which owns both Bamiyan and Jonathan's.

The use and non-use of ideophones (words that communicate an evocative feeling through phonology) in the menus is interesting due to a lack of direct translation. While English and Japanese both use ideophones, particularly onomatopoeia, Japanese also has ideophones that evoke non-sound phenomena. Kita (1997), and indeed most scholars of Japanese ideophones use the term mimetics for ideophones. He states that mimetics work not in an analytic dimension mapping directly to semantics but in a dimension where the words map to evoked feelings:

*In the affecto-imagistic dimension, various kinds of information from different cognitive modalities remain modality-specific, creating the subjective effect of evoking an image or 're-experience.'*

(Kita, 1997, p. 387)

That is, by reading the terms in the menus such as とろとろ (torotoro: juicy/smooth), the menu

viscerally evokes the taste and texture in the reader. However, the level of English (and Chinese in the case of Bamiyan) description is far less vivid. Purely functional, analytic language is used to describe the dishes, with the exception of “Soft and fluffy” in the Jonathan’s menu to describe French toast, where fluffy has a certain ideophonic quality due to the labiodental fricative /f/ being repeated. Therefore, it could be said that the language use in the menus on the whole are marked by use of ideophones in Japanese and generally unmarked in the cases of Chinese and English.

Between all of the restaurants investigated, there was found to be marked differences in the amount of katakana used. Bamiyan used the least amount of katakana in its menu, while Jonathan's used the most. Bamiyan's low amount of katakana is most likely due to the longer historical ties between Japan and China, certainly prior to the closure of the country in the Edo period (1603-1867), which results in the use of kanji for the names of many Chinese dishes.

The length of dish names in Bamiyan are much longer in English than most dish names at the other restaurants. One reason for this is the use of key ingredients in dish names, such as *'Fried Chinese breadstick with brown sugar syrup and served with vanilla ice cream'*. However, there this also accounts for the occasional long dish names at Jonathan's, such as *'Bracken starch dumpling (MATCHA taste) with soft ice cream'*.

A further point of interest in the lexicogrammar of the menus is the noun modification. Japanese canonical noun modification is performed by adjectives preceding the noun, which appears in these menus. However, English nouns can be modified by using nouns or adjectives prior to the noun (premodification) or with prepositional phrases after the noun (postmodification). The menus examined have a large amount of postmodification, which appears to have been chosen for a specific effect. It appears that the purpose for the postmodification is to provide a sense of luxury, that not only is it the noun that can be ordered but the noun with its supplement(s).

Finally, it should be stated that there were only two language errors present in the menus examined. While translation infelicities are present in many instances of English use in commercial and/or professional contexts, the absence in the menus is notable for two main reasons: First, the provision of English as part of the restaurants' service may dictate that English errors be avoided lest they be perceived as an arbitrary signifier for service quality. Where errors were found (redundant or confusing prepositions; the name of a dessert 'Cappuccino' being the same as a drink), overall meaning was not compromised, particularly due to the use of photographs for every dish. Additionally, it should be noted that the restaurants in question appeal to the mass market rather than the luxury market and therefore perfection may not be expected by customers.



## Discussion

### Multimodality

The use of varying modalities in the menus has the potential to create polysemic texts which may confuse customers. When communicating in additional languages, there is the opportunity of amplified meaning when modality and language complement one another, yet there may also be a risk of confusion when language and modality contradict one another. In the menus examined, there are few cases of contradiction, particularly because the use of photographs for each dish confirms the message conveyed by the words used in the languages. This use of multimodality is additive: without the words, the pictures themselves convey insufficient information, yet without the pictures, the dishes themselves would be somewhat abstract in the case of those descriptions where ideophones are not used. Certainly for English and Chinese users, these photographic illustrations make the dishes more visceral.

### Loan words

The number of loan words in Japanese was extensive for many of the restaurants, with some interesting usages. Saizeriya's Japanese menu items tended to be constructed from loan words with the addition of a Japanese adjective, while Bamiyan's menu items were generally a mixture of kanji and katakana. Jonathan's and Coco's used unmodified loan words for their Japanese menu items.

If katakana is actually used to mark non-Japanese cultural items, then this appears to be achieved to a certain degree in the Saizeriya menu. However, the use of hiragana to describe the dish through adjectival modification seems to signify a Japanese quality to the dishes. This is potentially used to signify a standard of care toward food that is supposedly a Japanese value, and which is not expected to be provided to the same standard outside of Japan. It is therefore not Italian food provided at Saizeriya but Italian food provided with Japanese preparation and service. The same could also be said of Bamiyan, which uses kanji, hiragana and katakana. Kanji is expected on Chinese restaurant menus, yet the use of kana may be used implicitly to yet again mark out not only a Japanese quality to the dishes and service, but may also be used to imply lower prices than more 'authentic' high-end Chinese restaurants. However, it may be the case that in stating the name of dishes with no other description, Coco's and Jonathan's appear not to provide an implied level of service. The reason for this may be to maintain authenticity, because these two restaurants are 'family' restaurants and therefore not tied to a nation-state's food culture, and therefore may be at risk of having an unclear message by providing codemeshing, where languages are not used alternately but as one single integrative system (Canagarajah, 2011).

## Ideophones

Some of the ideophones used in Japanese in the menus were frequently omitted from the European language usages. Such omission may be due to the lack of widely used words to describe taste in English, attested to by Ankerstein and Pereira's (2013) elicitation study regarding the taste of fruits and vegetables, where "Most (74%) of the taste features were "sweet" (40%), "bitter" (18%), "sour" (16%)." (p. 308). Additionally, as Chinese lacks onomatopoeic adjectives, these are also, more obviously, omitted from Bamiyan's Chinese usage. Moreover, some other adjectives are omitted from the dish descriptions, such as national origins (ベルギー used in Japanese but not in English in Coco's menu).

As can be seen in the results, we can say that there is a fair degree of code mixing (Canagarajah, 2011) and also discrete language usage. For example, there is some use of Chinese within Japanese and vice versa, though there may be some inaccuracies in translation. Additionally, it may be the case that some of the non-English words used in otherwise English parts of the menu may simply be selected because of their familiarity to Japanese people, or due to a lack of knowledge on behalf of the menu translator.

## Limitations

One limitation of the study was that we were unable to access restaurants safely during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is regrettable, not only because we could not sample the desserts from the menus, but also because we could not reflect potential real-time changes in the menus. However, we are confident that our data is generally representative of the restaurants in our sample. This resulted also in the sourcing of Jonathan's menus which had insufficient resolution for Chinese *hanzi* characters to be legible for identification or linguistic analysis. It may therefore be the case that some of the claims made for uses of Chinese in comparison with other languages need to be tempered. Certainly, we encourage further research.

An additional limitation of the study was that, in some cases, our coding decisions may be interpreted differently by readers. However, this would be a case of languages being interpreted differently due to the individual basis of linguistic repertoires. In spite of this, all authors have discussed interpretations, and we believe that we have made reasonable interpretations that would be agreed with by other people.

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