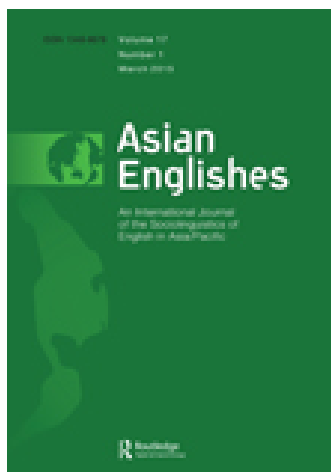


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Examining the functions and identities associated with English and Korean in South Korea: a linguistic landscape study

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Examining the functions and identities associated with English and Korean in South Korea: a linguistic landscape study

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This study focuses on the linguistic landscape (LL) of Seoul, South Korea and, via the examination of bottom-up public signage in areas of different functions, the study aims to elucidate the functions of English and Korean in the society, and how they relate to the statuses and ideologies associated with the two languages. Special attention is paid to the distinction between information-giving and decorative signs, especially for signs containing English, as it will potentially reveal whether English plays a communicative or symbolic function in South Korea. By paying attention to sign content and the different establishment types in the sign coding method, this paper argues that the linguistic landscape of Seoul reflects the city's careful and calculated use of English and Korean to mark different identities. The findings suggest that both English and Korean in South Korea have symbolic and commercial value and the LL in South Korea has become increasingly commodified in nature.

Keywords: linguistic landscape; South Korea; bilingualism; language contact

Introduction

The focus of this study is to examine how the representation of languages on display in public signage can be linked to the associated statuses and identities of the languages in that particular society. The site of focus in this study is Seoul, the capital city of South Korea. While the South Korean population remains primarily monolingual in Korean, their fascination with English and their emphasis on English education in the country have been described as a 'frenzy' (Park, 2009). The use of English is also prevalent in areas such as pop music and TV shows (Shim, 1994). The presence of English in South Korea is so widespread that there has even been some debate on whether there is a viable Korean–English bilingual community in South Korea. While some scholars like Shim (1994) and Park (2009) look at the dominance of English in pop culture and education, Song (1998) argues that the use of English is more an index of symbolic value than for practical communication. This paper, by looking at the linguistic landscape (LL) of Seoul, hopes to offer a new perspective on the debate by examining the languages on signs, the functions of the signs and how they relate to the statuses, identities and ideologies associated with Korean and English.

Past LL research has primarily concentrated on areas of linguistic conflict and how the LL is shaped by different sociopolitical contexts. In contrast, this paper aims to show that the LL has potentially more uses, and that it can be used as a methodology to examine how the language and functions of signs can relate to the statuses and

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identities associated with the languages in any given society. Several LL studies have explored the globalization of English and its impact on the LL of countries such as Japan and Thailand where English is not widely spoken (Backhaus, 2006; Huebner, 2006). However, these studies are generally descriptive in nature and often stop at the numerical representation of languages in the region. Little is said about how the LL can reflect the statuses and functions each language plays in the region. It is against this background that we will address the limitations of past research and put forth a more detailed coding method for signs that go beyond solely looking at language representation in signs. In this paper, we examine the representation of different languages in non-official signs, with a focus on the Hangeul (Korean) and Roman (English) scripts. To examine the function of each language in the society, we will, in particular, make a distinction between ‘decorative signs’ and ‘information-giving signs’, the former (brand names etc.) being used to index identities, while the latter is primarily used to convey information. This distinction will be further explained in a later section. By carefully calibrating the classifications and examining the signs in sites of diverse functions, this paper argues that the linguistic landscape of Seoul reflects the city’s careful and calculated use of English and Korean to mark different identities.

Past LL research

The term *linguistic landscape* was first used by Landry and Bourhis (1997) to refer to linguistic items in the public space, and they can be seen as the symbolic construction of the public landscape. Past research has also established that the LL is a powerful informational and symbolic marker that reflects the power relations and statuses of languages and thereby linguistic communities in a given area (e.g. Backhaus, 2007; Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara, & Trumper-Hecht, 2006; Gorter, 2006). LL research, in other words, can be a powerful tool in the examination of the functions and attitudes of different languages in a country. Previous studies however, have tended to take a one-dimensional approach in viewing the LL. For example, in their seminal paper, Landry and Bourhis (1997) examine the attitudes of Francophone students towards public signs in Canada. Their approach looks at the LL as something already established and does not take into account factors or the different types of actors that shape the landscape. On the other hand, Spolsky and Cooper (1991) choose to focus on the factors that give rise to the formation of the LL in their research on the influence of politics on public signage in Jerusalem. Few studies, if any, have taken into account both the factors giving rise to and the actual landscape itself.

In terms of LL research focusing on English, the use of English as a status marker has been corroborated in a number of LL studies spanning different continents but few studies go beyond that to look at what functions English plays in the society. Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) examine the representation of Israel-Hebrew, Arabic and English on signs in several Israeli cities and East Jerusalem. The authors attribute the prestige of English to globalization but the study does not show how the increasing use of English may undermine the importance of other languages in the region. The same limitation is found in Backhaus’s (2007) study in Tokyo, where he focuses on the distinction between official and non-official signs. He proposes that English is used to associate with American/Western culture even though the signs may not be completely intelligible to certain groups in the Japanese population, but does not go beyond that to explain any possible impact on the Japanese language. In a monolingual country like South Korea, it is likely that the fast growing importance of English in the society will have an impact on Korean.

Through the examination of signs in Seoul, we will go beyond looking at the one-dimensional function of English and examine how English is negotiated with Korean.

There has also been some limitations in the way LL research has been traditionally carried out, especially with regard to LL studies concerning English. Many previous studies have treated all signs containing English as a single group performing the same function but we argue that it should not be assumed that all signs in the same language perform the same function. For example, in Backhaus's Tokyo study, all Western, non-Japanese signs are assumed and taken to be associated with Western culture. However, one questions if all English signs serve as status markers without informative content. Leeman and Modan (2009) also caution against such a view, pointing out that even though English and French are both considered foreign languages in Japan, they should not be lumped together, as an English sign in a subway may take on ideational content while a French sign in a French restaurant may simply convey authenticity and class. To better differentiate and understand the functions of English signs, in this study, we make a distinction between 'information-giving' and 'decorative' signs to differentiate the function of English as a status marker (decorative) and as a communicative tool (information-giving).

Most LL studies also generally adopt a quantitative approach by counting the number of signs and the representation of languages in an area and then attempt to draw a parallel between the findings and language attitudes, ethnolinguistic vitality and relative powers and statuses of the languages. Although a quantitative approach paints a general picture of the LL and picks up important trends and patterns, details such as the content and function of each language in a sign tend to be overlooked. Similarly, target viewership of signs tends also to be neglected in the sign coding methods of previous studies. South Korea has seen an increase in tourism in recent years and this raises the question whether the English signs are catering to foreigners or otherwise. In Huebner's (2006) study of the influence of English on Bangkok's LL for example, he challenges a previous claim by Smalley (1994) that the English signs in the public sphere are targeted at foreigners. Huebner argues that widespread language mixing suggests that English signs are increasingly targeted at bilingual locals and the presence of English is also producing a Thai variety of English. Such findings highlight the need to relook at the roles 'local' and 'foreign' languages play in signs, as their target audience may not be easily assumed.

While LL studies are not uncommon, few specific studies have been conducted in South Korea and there are currently only two known studies on the LL of Seoul, both of which take vastly different approaches in examining the linguistic landscape. Lawrence (2012) reports that English is usually found in certain domains, such as cafés and fashion outlets but is conspicuously absent in others, such as Korean restaurants. Vlack (2011), in another Korean LL study, focuses on the functions English plays in the cityscape and he collected 1205 signs in six different neighbourhoods in Seoul. In his study, he reports that Korean is used to symbolize tradition while English is used to mark modernity. The study claims that English holds both a symbolic and communicative role because 55% of bilingual English signs use English in a way that has no relation to Korean in that it is not a translation or repetition of the Korean content. However, one would question the strength of this evidence in supporting such a claim. Like previous studies mentioned, monolingual English signs are left out in this analysis and the study does not specify if the English is used in shop brand signs, non-brand signs or whether it has a decorative or information-giving function.

This study will therefore address the problems of the partiality of focus in previous studies, namely: (1) the inadequate classification of signs; (2) the lack of focus on sign

content; and (3) confounding factors in the choice of survey areas. We will focus on the distinction between ‘information-giving’ and ‘decorative’ signs, given that it has implications for the status and functions of English in the LL of Seoul. In addition, we will be making the distinction between monolingual and bilingual signs and the establishment types in which the signs are located. In doing so, we seek to answer the following questions:

- (1) To what extent is English represented in a monolingual country like South Korea and in which establishment types is the language most commonly found?
- (2) What function does English serve in the country where the language is not commonly spoken by the locals?
- (3) How does the increasing presence of English in the public sphere reflect the statuses and identities associated with the language and how is that done in negotiation with Korean?

Methodology

Seoul, the capital of South Korea, is chosen for the study as it is the financial and cultural centre of the country and it is where changes are first embraced. It is likely that the linguistic landscape in Seoul will be the most vibrant and language change and trends found in Seoul will trickle down to other cities in time.

The survey areas are chosen to encompass as wide a range of LL as possible so we can evaluate the status and functions of English in Seoul. The areas range from university settings to tourist areas to residential districts. The main factor of consideration is function. Each survey area has a distinct function and is chosen because they attract a specific crowd and we are interested in whether the LL in each area reflects its functions and clientele. Two districts are included for tourist areas because they are very distinct from each other and it is likely that there will be a difference in the representation of the two languages in each area. The survey areas in Seoul are as follows:

- (1) Ewha Womans University campus.
The campus is chosen because the university students are most likely to be bilingual in English and Korean. This university also has a strong English language learning program.
- (2) Street directly outside Ewha Womans University campus.
This shopping street is chosen as it is, as expected, popular with the young university students. Given that this street will see the same clientele as the university campus, the LL of this street will provide a fair comparison as to whether or not the languages used in signs here will be similar to that of the campus.
- (3) Tourist areas
 - (a) Myeongdong
Myeongdong is a shopping district with many local and international brands and is popular with both tourists and locals.
 - (b) Insadong
Insadong is a heritage area devoted to Korean traditional arts and culture, with many specialty shops selling Korean traditional food and souvenirs.

- (4) Sinsadong
Sinsadong is affluent district frequented by well travelled cosmopolitan locals.
- (5) Myeongnyun
Myeongnyun is a quiet residential district located in a non-touristy neighbourhood.

In the determination of what makes a ‘sign’, this study follows the definition of signs in Backhaus’s Tokyo study. A sign is defined as ‘any piece of written text within a spatially definable frame’ (Backhaus, 2007, p. 66). Each sign will be counted as one item and signs in the interior of the shop will be excluded (unless it is close to or on the window pane) as we are interested in the external visible landscape from the street-view. Non-stationary signs (e.g. signs on buses) will not be included as they are not part of the landscape. Text printed on clothes, mugs or other small objects will also be excluded as they are not part of the establishment signage. Following Backhaus’s study, each survey area will be a two-sided street between two traffic lights on a main street. The main objective is to select a street that is most central and representative of the survey area and although it is difficult to standardize the selection, care has been taken to choose a similar length of street across all surveyed areas. Parks, gardens, parking lots and shopping malls are excluded as much as possible. The documentation of items is done using a LUMIX FX3 digital camera. The signs are then categorized using a coding method as explained in the next section.

Coding of signs

The classification and coding of each sign is motivated by the factors that we are interested in for this study: namely the distinction between information-giving versus decorative signs, shop brand versus non-brand signs, and monolingual versus bilingual signs.

The information-giving versus decorative function of languages on signs have been discussed in various past research. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Soanes & Stevenson, 2003, p. 1645), a sign can take on a function such as ‘a notice on public display that gives information or instruction in a written or symbolic form’. In this definition, the focus is clearly on the information-giving function of signs. Kelly-Holmes (2005, p. 24) refers to this as the ‘use-value’ of languages, and Fairclough (as cited in Agnihotri & McCormick, 2010) calls it a ‘utility-based’ text choice. The information-giving function of signs, one can expect, is used most prominently in directions, notices and warning signs, where the main purpose is to communicate information and the languages used in such signs are those its intended audience are competent in.

On the other hand, the symbolic load of languages on signs can overtake the information-giving role. These signs are meant to be seen but not read and the languages are chosen for their visual impact and associated identities. Kelly-Holmes (2005, p. 24) refers to this as the ‘exchange or symbolic’ value of signs. In a similar fashion, Taavitsainen and Pahta (2008, p. 37) calls this the ‘image-creating function’ of signs while Fairclough (as cited in Agnihotri & McCormick, 2010), refers to this as a ‘festishized linguistic choice’. English, in particular, has been said to be used for purposes such as that of a status marker. Curtin (2009, p. 228), for instance, uses the term ‘vogue or display English’ to refer to such signs where English functions to index certain identities and attitudes. In Curtin’s (2009) study on indexical signs in Taipei, Taipei

locals have been reported to say that they do not actually read English signs but instead associate the script with being modern and fashionable. In a similar study, Radtke and Yuan (2011, p. 404) discuss the ‘decorative use of English’ in the linguistic landscape of China.

As the aim of the study is to find out if English in South Korea plays more of a communicative or symbolic function, we make this distinction for the English language portions of all signs. In Vlack’s (2011) study, signs containing English were categorized into four groups: (i) English with repetition; (ii) English with translation; (iii) English with additional information; and (iv) English with non-related information. In Vlack’s study, signs belonging to groups (i) and (iv), namely, English with repetition and English with non-related information, are seen to function as symbolic signs which are attention grabbing in nature. On the other hand, signs belonging to groups (ii) and (iii), namely, English with translation and English with additional information, are seen as communicative signs. We will, in this paper, employ this categorization as much as possible as Vlack’s criteria can help put some objectivity in the categorization. English found in shop names, for example, will be grouped as communicative if the name is related to the establishment type (e.g. *Kraze Burger* for a burger joint) and as symbolic if the name is entirely unrelated (e.g. *Farmer* for a fashion boutique). In many cases however, the reality of the LL in Seoul makes it difficult to put the classification into use all the time, especially in sites like Myeongdong where boutiques and cafés may in fact have English *without* repetition, but can still be perceived as being symbolic. Also, the information communicated in a sign can vary according to the viewer. For example, an English sign can convey modernity and ‘Western’ identities to a monolingual Korean but to a bilingual Korean or a foreigner, the sign can convey both the symbolic capital and information. There is also a need to separate signs in commercial establishments to shop brand signs versus non-brand (information) signs. Brand signs are usually the most prominent and biggest signs in a commercial establishment and they communicate the identities that the shop wants to be identified with. In the landscape, brand signs are usually the most visible signs and we want to examine if there is a trend in the language(s) used in brand signs. On the other hand, other signs in a commercial establishment are likely to be information providing and smaller in nature. By separating the sign types, we can see if there is a difference in the use of languages on these two sign types.

For our purpose of categorization therefore, we also further separate the signs into various groups according to their main purpose, as well as the languages on the signs. As we will be looking at signs in both English and Korean, we will also be paying attention to the script on the signs, i.e. the Hangeul and Roman scripts. This is because the signs can be presented in, besides Korean in Hangeul script and English in the Roman alphabet, other combinations such as the romanization of Korean, Konglish/creative English and English written in Hangeul script. Other languages, such as Mandarin Chinese and Japanese will be included and counted in the data collection but will be excluded in the data analysis for this paper as our emphasis is on Korean and English.

In the classification of bilingual signs, we will use Ben-Rafael et al.’s (2006) ‘guide that the relative font size, colour, order of appearance and location of the language are determining factors to judge the saliency of the language. Hence, the language in a more prominent position, in a larger font size or of a more striking colour is considered as the first language.

In order to examine the representation of the languages in different types of commercial establishments, signs will be classified according to shop type. We make

distinctions between Korean and non-Korean food and beverage outlets, beauty, fashion and art galleries. Art galleries are given their own category due to their large presence in Insadong. Signs that do not belong to any carrier or building names will be classified as non-shop.

Results and analysis

A total of 1253 signs were counted from the six survey areas, out of which four signs are purely numerical signs and are thus taken out of the study, leaving 1249 signs that constitute the sample of this study. Across all six areas, signs containing Roman (English) and/or Hangeul script are dominant, making up 98.6% of total signs, while only 18 signs (1.4%) contain either Japanese and/or Mandarin Chinese only. Out of all language combinations in bilingual signs, Korean–English bilingual signs make up 130 (10%) of total signs, followed by English–Korean bilingual signs at 70 (6%). Figure 1 shows the percentage breakdown of the three most common sign types across the six areas. The specific breakdown of languages and the LL of each area will be explained in the next section.

Ewha campus

Unlike other survey areas, only Korean written in the Hangeul script and English in the Roman script are represented in the signs in the Ewha campus. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of signs in the area and it is clear that monolingual Korean signs are dominant.

Surprisingly, the LL of the campus does not reflect the high concentration of local bilingual students, or the existence of a sizable population of foreign students in the campus. English is mainly represented in official school signs and usually consists of a translation of the Korean information, and is targeted at the foreign students. Even so, English is not consistently present in all school signs. On the other hand, notices and information banners in the university are almost exclusively written in Korean and this

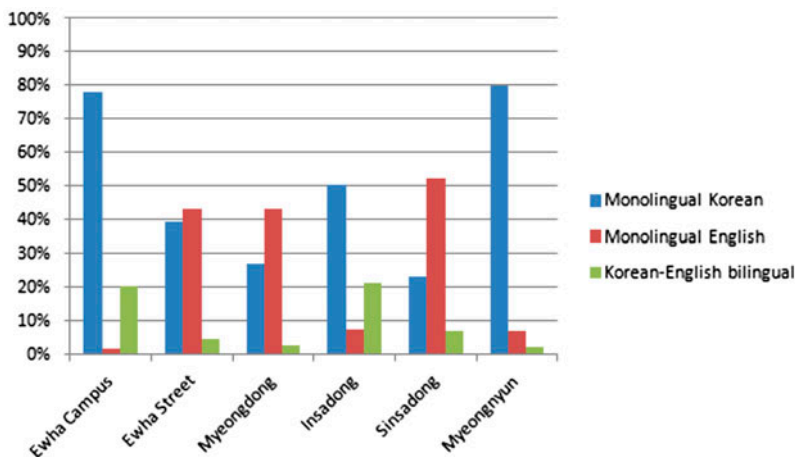


Figure 1. Percentage breakdown of the three common sign types across the six areas.

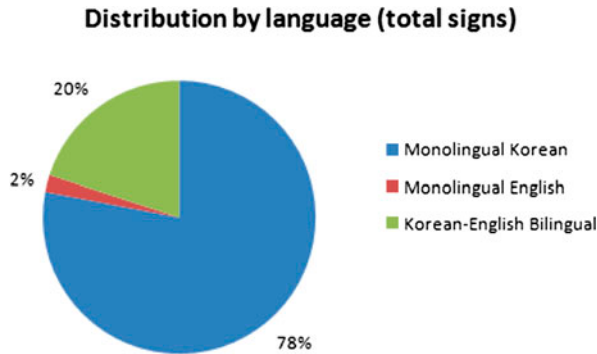


Figure 2. Distribution of signs in Ewha campus.

is unexpected, given a substantial number of foreign students at the university. Although there are a few Korean–English bilingual signs in the campus, they feature language mixing at the word level, where an English word is inserted in the middle of a Korean sentence, as seen in Figure 3. Information is primarily given in Korean and the use of English can be seen as attention grabbing and stylistic.

Ewha streets

The university street right outside the campus shows a very different LL, even though it caters to the same young university crowd. As mentioned earlier, Ewha streets are popular with the young university students as these streets are occupied by hip and trendy fashion boutiques and cafés. Unlike the LL inside the campus, monolingual English signs are dominant in the university street, accounting for 43% of the 95 signs collected, as seen in Figure 4.

As can be seen also in Figure 4, after dividing the signs into shop names and non-brand signs, it is clear that English and Korean occupy different roles in the area. English is dominant in brand signs while Korean is dominant in information signs.

English is highly represented in the area, in stark contrast to the Ewha campus, even though the crowd and clientele remains the same. Typical stores on the street use English in their brand names while most of the other signs providing information are written in Korean. Figures 5 and 6 are taken from the same café and show the typical usage of English and Korean. English is solely used in the brand name. The menu and all other information-providing signs are written entirely in Korean. This suggests strongly that English is only used for decorative purpose and Korean is used to communicate information necessary for sales transactions.



Figure 3. KB Bank recruitment talk in campus showing language mixing of an English word within a Korean sentence.

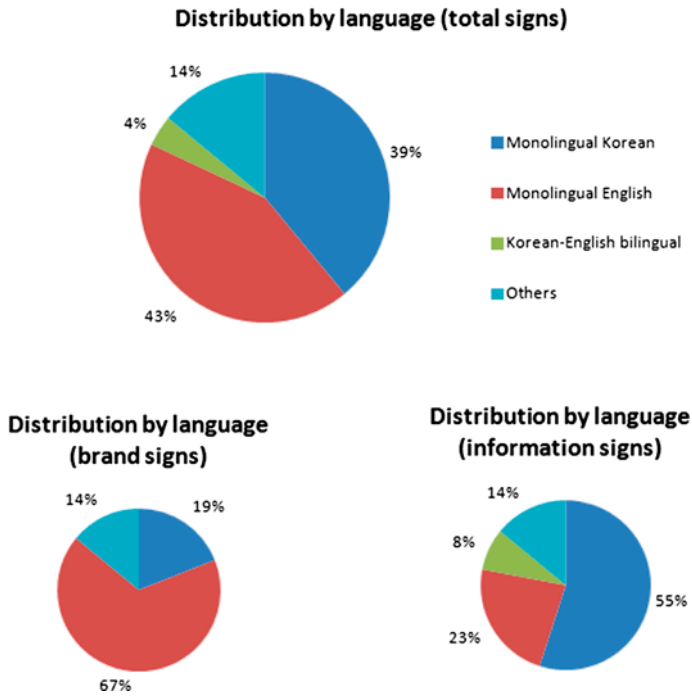


Figure 4. Distribution of signs in Ewha streets.



Figure 5. Café in Ewha Street with an English brand name.

Myeongdong

Similar to Ewha streets, English has a strong presence in Myeongdong. As mentioned earlier, Myeongdong is a tourist shopping area popular both with tourists and Koreans. It is an area with many restaurants, cafés, fashion boutiques and skincare shops. The function of English in Myeongdong can be expected to be similar to that in Ewha



Figure 6. Korean information signs in the same café.

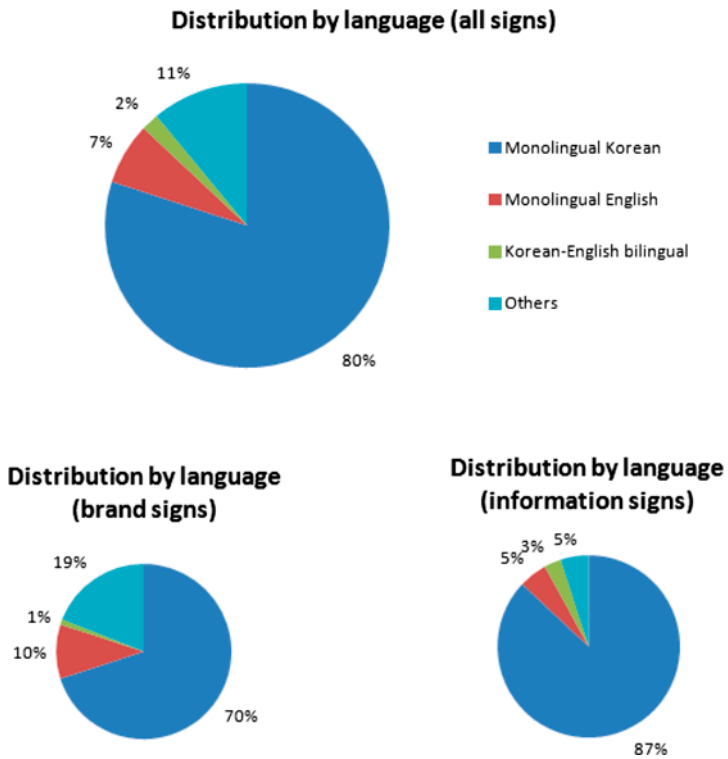


Figure 7. Distribution of signs in Myeongdong.

streets. As shown in Figure 7, monolingual English constitutes 43% of total signs, followed by monolingual Korean signs (27%) and English–Korean bilingual signs (11%). English is well represented in both brand and non-brand signs.

Many local businesses have their brand names in English and these signs serve mainly decorative functions that cater to fit in the trendy and modern vibe of the district. Figure 8 shows a local lingerie boutique. English is dominant in the brand sign and even the Hangeul transliteration (*ba-di-pap*) serves to reinforce the English sign. Similar to Ewha Street, the use of English is clearly not meant to communicate information but serves a symbolic purpose.

Sinsadong

Sinsadong is an affluent commercial district frequented by many cosmopolitan and well travelled locals. Even though Sinsadong is not a tourist attraction, signs containing English make up 74% of the total signs in the area. English is clearly the most visible language in the area. Monolingual English signs make up 52% of the total signs, followed by monolingual Korean signs at 23%, as shown in Figure 9.

The high percentage of English signs can be attributed partly to the number of international brands housed in the area. However, unlike Myeongdong or Ewha streets where the majority of English brand signs are local brands, a number of the English signs in Sinsadong are international brands such as Levis and Chanel, reflecting its status as an affluent district. Non-brand signs, however, remain primarily in Korean, similar to other commercial districts such as Myeongdong and Ewha Street. As can be seen, even in an affluent district like Sinsadong where one is more likely to find well-heeled, overseas-educated, cosmopolitan Koreans, the presence of English is still symbolic and Korean remains the key language of information and communication.



Figure 8. Local lingerie boutique in Myeongdong.

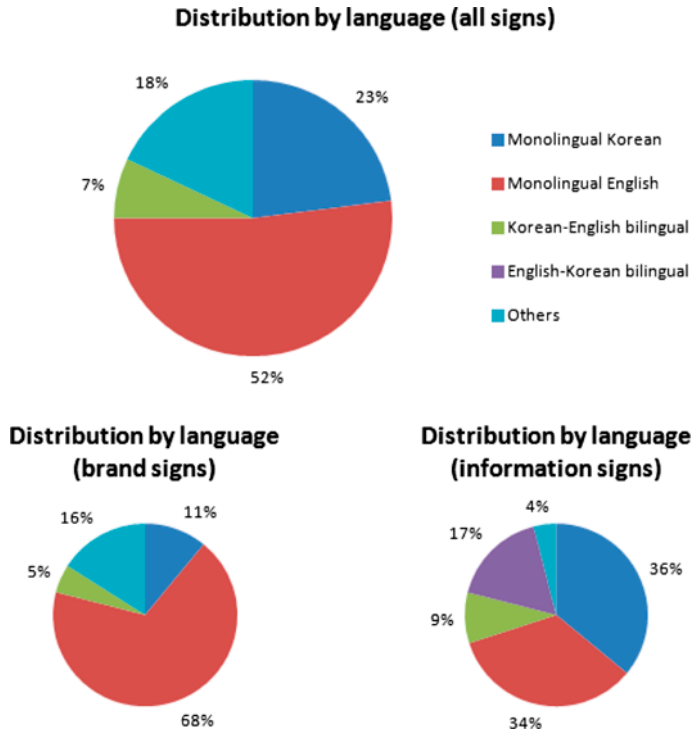


Figure 9. Distribution of signs in Sinsadong.

Myeongnyun

Myeongnyun is a typical Korean residential area, a contrast to the areas described earlier. One can expect fewer boutiques and trendy cafés as compared to Ewha Street, Myeongdong and Sinsadong. As a result of that, one can see that English is hardly present in the neighbourhood. Korean, on the other hand, has a strong dominance in Myeongnyun, with monolingual Korean signs making up 80% of the total signs, as seen in Figure 10, and monolingual Korean signs make up 87% of the total non-brand (information) signs.

One of the dominant traits of Myeongnyun is the presence of a large number of traditional Korean restaurants, such as the restaurant shown in Figure 11. Most of the signs in this area are Korean as these traditional Korean restaurants use only monolingual Korean signs. Korean is used to both represent tradition and communicate information, and English is seldom used in such restaurants, whether in brand or information signs.

Insadong

For all the survey sites covered thus far, English generally takes on a decorative function while Korean takes up the bulk of the role of communicating information. While Korean does seem to index tradition, particularly in brand signs of traditional Korean restaurants, its symbolic use has not been the focus. However in Insadong, Korean is

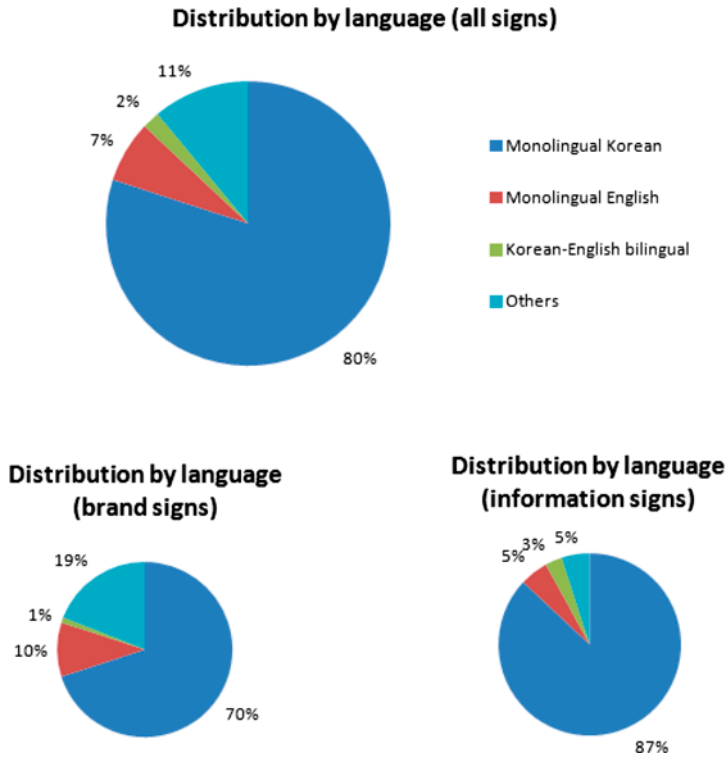


Figure 10. Distribution of signs in Myeongnyun.

deliberately used to capitalize on its symbolic value, such that the decorative function of Korean takes precedence.

Even though Insadong, like Myeongdong, is a key tourist area, Korean is substantially more represented in the LL in Insadong. Insadong is a heritage and tourist district devoted to Korean traditional arts and culture. As can be seen in Figure 12, 50% of all signs are monolingual Korean signs, while monolingual English signs account for a smaller percentage as compared to other areas surveyed earlier.

The difference between the use of Korean and English signs is even starker when the sign type is taken into consideration. Korean dominates the landscape in both shop brand and non-brand signs. This is a contrast to Myeongdong where English is dominant in both.

Even though Insadong is a tourist area, one possible explanation for the lack of English signs is the commodification of the area as a tourist area rich in traditional Korean culture. Both the government and private enterprises use symbols of Korean tradition and culture (language, architecture, etc.) to turn Insadong into a commodity and market it accordingly. The idea of commodification is expounded in Leeman and Modan (2009), where they claim that the manifestation and use of Chinese language in Washington, DC's Chinatown is an effort to turn the area into a commodity and market it and its goods as part of the symbolic economy. Cultural symbols are integral in the marketplace and language is likewise used to promote consumption. This can also explain why there are more Chinese and Japanese signs in Insadong compared to English signs. The area is known to attract proportionately more Chinese and Japanese



Figure 11. Typical Korean restaurant found in Myeongnyun with signs entirely in Korean.

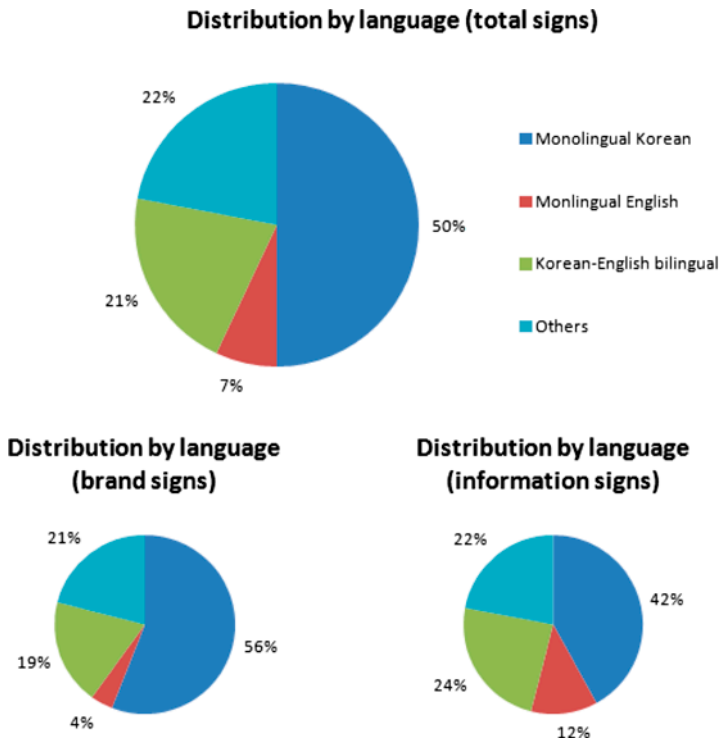


Figure 12. Distribution of signs in Insadong.

tourists, and private enterprises are motivated to have more Chinese and Japanese signs accordingly. With time, the proportion of tourists in the area may change and perhaps the languages representation may change accordingly.

Insadong is also the only area where there is explicit government effort to regulate the language of bottom-up signs. Because of its function as a heritage area, there is a government policy to use Korean in all outdoor signs (Lawrence, 2012). As a result, brand signs in the area (which are arguably the most visible) generally contain Korean. English monolingual signs, in contrast, are almost non-existent. Because of the policy, many shop brands, which are traditionally in English in all other areas of South Korea, are uniquely written in the Hangeul script in Insadong. Figure 13 shows the only Starbucks sign in South Korea written in Hangeul (read as ‘Seu-ta-beok-seu-keo-pi’), with English in a small font at the bottom right. Contrast this with Figure 14 which is captured in Ewha Street, showing a typical Starbucks outlet with the opposite use of languages. The English portion of the sign is much bigger, while the Hangeul version is written in the small right hand corner.

Insadong has the most varied language combinations of signs across all six areas. In particular, it contains the largest number of signs with Korean written in the Roman alphabet and signs where English written in the Hangeul script is dominant. Script mixing is also most visible in the Insadong area. Romanized Korean is likely to take on a decorative or symbolic function as it is seemingly made accessible to foreigners but retaining its Korean meaning, which would not have made much sense to non-Korean speakers. As seen above, explicit government effort accounts for the higher numbers of signs with English written in the Hangeul script in the area. The use of Hangeul script on these signs is not meant to cater to the Korean population nor the foreigners as these chain stores use English in their brand names in all of their other outlets. Instead, Hangeul is used to create a ‘themed environment’ (Leeman & Modan, 2009, p. 350)



Figure 13. Unique Starbucks Coffee in Insadong (written in the Hangeul script and the English brand beneath).



Figure 14. Typical Starbucks Coffee outlet in Ewha Street.

that capitalizes on the symbolic value of the Hangeul script. Although Insadong is designated as a heritage area and is popular with both locals and tourists, it is undeniable that foreigners make up the bulk of their customers as most shops sell tourist souvenirs. The use of Hangeul script creates an environment that is ‘exotic’ to foreigners and attracts tourists to go to Insadong specially to experience Korean heritage and culture. At the same time, the symbolic meaning of Hangeul script in Insadong is also relevant to the Koreans themselves in that it marks their ethnicity and traditional culture. Korean in this case works as a symbol on display and this is similar to Chinese in Washington, DC. The LL of Insadong can be said to be a ‘commodified display of ethnicity’ (Leeman & Modan, 2009, p. 359).

Functions of English and Korean

After looking at the representation of the languages in each area, we now turn to the more general question of the functions that English and Korean play in the LL of Seoul.

As seen in Figure 15, signs containing English make up more than 50% of total signs in Ewha streets, Myeongdong and Sinsadong. These three areas share the same characteristics of having many fashion and beauty related shops, and of catering to a younger crowd. In these three areas, English used as a decorative display makes up a higher percentage of total English-containing signs.

Figure 16, for instance, shows a typical use of English as a decorative sign, where ‘FARMER’ is used as a brand name for a local fashion accessory store with no links to the meaning of ‘farmer’ at all. English can be seen as simply indexing modernity and class and the sign does not have any information-giving function. Indeed, one can even argue that the English word is chosen without much thought to its meaning as the connotations associated with the word have nothing to do with modernity or class.

In fact, there is a substantial number of English-containing signs that look like they are information-giving, but upon closer analysis, have stronger symbolic value as compared to their information-giving role. In these signs, important information is still

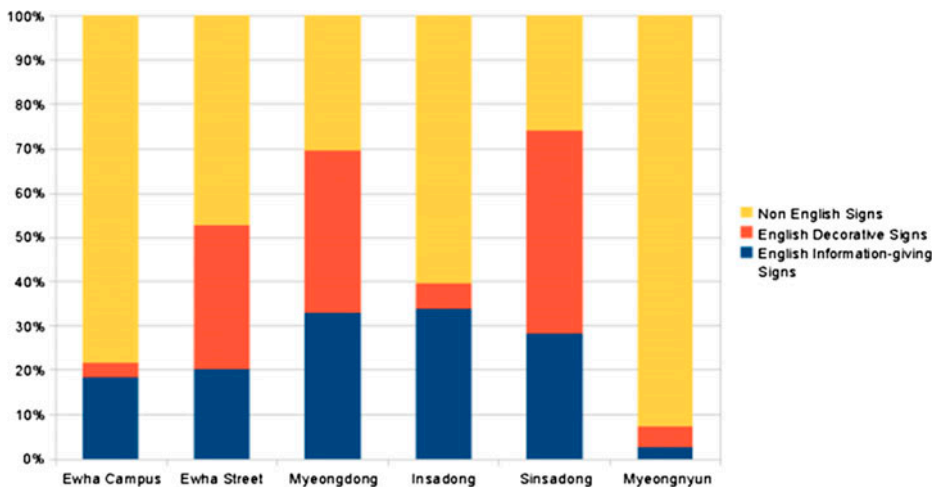


Figure 15. Distribution of English information-giving and decorative signs across areas.



Figure 16. Fashion accessory shop named 'Farmer' in Sinsadong.

given in Korean and English takes on a more peripheral role. Figure 17 shows a Korean–English bilingual information sign outside a cosmetic store in Sinsadong.

Most of the information on sales and items are written in Korean, with the exception of 'Price Off'. Even without understanding the English phrase, a Korean can easily understand what is written on the sign, which is a sales event on several cosmetic products. English, in this case, plays a minor role in conveying information. On the other hand, a foreigner reading the same sign can only get the information that a sale is going on, but is not able to know any of the details. The use of English in such signs is not entirely empty of ideational content but it does not offer crucial information and such usage of English is common in the so-called bilingual signs in the surveyed areas.

Many bilingual signs, such as those seen in Figure 17, are in fact simply English words appearing in Korean sentences and the use of code mixing at the word level is to gain attention. Such signs are common in areas such as Myeongdong and Ewha



Figure 17. Sign outside a cosmetic shop in Sinsadong showing English as a decorative sign disguised as an information-giving sign.

streets, where the use of English is widespread. And in such cases, we can see that English is actually functioning as a status marker, and is in actual fact, symbolic rather than information-giving in nature.

Analysis by shop types

As can be seen in the earlier sections, one can see the possibility that language on shop signs is more motivated by establishment types instead of by area or region. The distribution of English and Korean is clearest in restaurants, cafés and fashion outlets.

Some 93.6% of all signs in Korean restaurants across all six areas are Korean-dominant. This is true also for Korean traditional tea houses found in Insadong. In cafés however, the situation is slightly different. English is dominant in brand signs, whereas Korean is almost solely used in non-brand signs. This is true even in the residential areas where Korean signs are more common. English used in café signs can be seen here to index a modern and Western identity associated with cafés.

Similar to cafés, English is used in fashion outlets mostly in brand signs while Korean is almost solely reserved for non-brand information signs. Table 1 shows the distribution of languages on signs in fashion outlets across all five areas (the campus is excluded). Again, with the exception of Insadong, English is used in signs in fashion outlets across all areas. The lack of fashion outlets in Myeongnyun may be the reason why English is hardly represented in the area.

In summary, one can see that the languages on signs are found to be more motivated by shop types compared to area types. English is used as a status marker and performs a decorative function. In particular, it is highly represented in cafés and fashion outlets, which are associated with Western identities and class.

English as symbolic capital

Similar to previous LL studies conducted in South Korea, English is found to serve as a symbolic marker of modernity and affluence. English is associated with modernity in many countries, not just South Korea. However, what is special about South Korea is that the country places an extreme importance in English proficiency, or rather, the proof of it in terms of TOEIC and TOEFL scores. English proficiency is often used as a criterion for getting into good schools, receiving scholarships and securing a good job in prestigious Korean conglomerates. As such, English has additional prestige and links to socioeconomic status that are not seen in other countries. Together, such attitudes propel the belief that English is a symbol of affluence, prestige and upward mobility. Lee (2010) points out, for instance, that the prestige and symbolic capital linked to English is more important to the Koreans than actual proficiency in the English language. This is also reflected in the LL of Seoul, where the symbolic value

Table 1. Distribution of languages on signs in fashion outlets.

	Ewha Street	Myeongdong	Insadong	Sinsadong	Myeongnyun
English monolingual	12	57	7	92	0
Eng-dominant	0	12	4	14	0
Korean monolingual	0	12	21	15	0
Kor-dominant	0	4	7	7	0

of English is prominent in brand signs, especially in fashion outlets and cafés. In particular, Sinsadong can be described as a primarily English-dominant landscape, with English having a very strong visual presence in the area. This is probably one of the reasons why the area attracts many affluent and cosmopolitan Koreans and, given the increasing popularity of the area with many Koreans aspiring to such a 'Western' lifestyle, the use of English has become even more prevalent.

It is quite clear from the results that there is an increasing presence of English in South Korea. English has found its way into a large majority of public signage, even though the sign owner may not be proficient in English or use the language much in daily life. This is exactly the situation Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) refer to when they argue that the use of a particular linguistic symbol does not necessarily mean that the LL actor has any knowledge of the language, but yet it does not prevent them from doing so. This point is also brought up in Park (2009), where he identifies necessitation as one of the main ideologies of English within South Korea. Necessitation refers to the belief that every South Korean must learn English, even though they may not have a use for it in everyday life or in the workplace. This is clearly reflected in the LL. English is not used to signify 'un-Koreanness' or to appeal to foreigners. It is simply something that people aspire toward. English is associated with positive connotations, and is not, as Park (2009) argues, an 'externalization' process where English is seen as the 'other' and the 'out-group'. English has found a way into the Korean community as a tool to index their modernity, while not reducing any of its 'Korean-ness' in any way.

At this point, one wonders if our study of the LL in Seoul can provide some evidence for the existence of a viable Korean–English bilingual speech community in South Korea. As we have tried to show, the function of English in Seoul is very much still symbolic. This is a contrast to Vlack (2011, p. 574) where he concludes that English has a communicative function because over half of the bilingual signs from his data contain English content that is 'not directly determined by the use of Korean in those signs'. His study found that among its many functions, English is used to extend the message written in Korean. This however has not been found in our study. Instead, English takes on a symbolic function in the bulk of the signs collected. Even in English information-giving signs which take on ideational content, they usually contain simple words such as 'café', 'coffee', 'sale' and there is little evidence that these signs are really meant to inform. The majority of non-brand signs containing crucial information are still in monolingual Korean or at least accompanied by Korean explanations. It is difficult and premature therefore to conclude that there is a Korean–English bilingual community simply from the existence of English signs in an area. Code-mixing is starting to appear but remains limited to the use of English as an attention grabber, capitalizing on the symbolic value of the language. In particular, the LLs of the university campus and Sinsadong, where bilinguals are most likely to be concentrated, do not reflect the English proficiency of their speakers. Monolingual Korean signs almost exclusively dominate the university campus and Korean is still the dominant language present in information signs in Sinsadong.

To conclude, it can be seen that English in South Korea is still very much a language of symbolic and market value, with little or no intent to inform in its content. In Seoul, English is used to signify a higher social standing and modernity, and its presence in local signs helps to propel the establishment to a higher class and locals perpetuate this 'elevation' by purchasing from and being seen in such shops. This is not dissimilar to the situation in Beijing where English is used by commercial establishments as both a linguistic and ideological act to engage in 'scale jumping' (Lin, 2009,

p. 82). In a Korean news article (Bae, 2009), an industry insider admitted that local cosmetic makers use English names because they want to be identified or 'mistaken' as an English brand because of competition with foreign brands. English is showing itself to be of substantial market value. With the increasing use of the English language to appeal to its customers, many establishments in Seoul are tapping into the symbolic economy and the LL has become increasingly commercial in nature. Although Korean is mainly used in commercial signs to communicate information, it can, at times, be deliberately used to emphasize tradition and Insadong exploits this symbolic function to create a commercialized heritage area to attract both tourists and Koreans. It is perhaps not too far off to say that the LL in South Korea is becoming increasingly commodified in nature.

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