Exploring Translation in Urban Spaces: A Case Study of the Linguistic Landscape in Yiwu's Foreign Communities

Exploración de la traducción en la ciudad: un estudio del paisaje lingüístico en la comunidad extranjera de Yiwu

Jialin LIU
Universidad de Salamanca
jialin@usal.es

ABSTRACT: Translation and urban integration have evolved into a multi-dimensional, complex interdisciplinary issue. Urban linguistic landscapes are an essential part of city culture, serving as a space for social behavior and creative expression. Studying these linguistic landscapes can enhance our understanding of the cultural connotations and extensions of cities, thereby promoting cultural exchange among people from different regions, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. This study combines linguistic landscape theory and Simon's translational city theory to deconstruct the traditional concept of «city» and reconstruct a new concept of «city» from the perspective of translation. It analyzes the translation practices in the urban spaces of immigrant communities in Yiwu, China, exploring how translation shapes the city's linguistic landscape, the positive role of translation in cultural innovation and urban modernity, and its impact on urban language planning and policy.

KEYWORDS: urban space; translational city; outward turn; immigrant communities; linguistic landscape.

RESUMEN: La traducción y la integración urbana se han convertido en un problema interdisciplinario complejo y multidimensional. Los paisajes lingüísticos urbanos son esenciales para la cultura de la ciudad, sirviendo como espacios de comportamiento social y expresión creativa. Estudiar estos paisajes mejora nuestra comprensión de las connotaciones culturales y extensiones de las ciudades, promoviendo el intercambio cultural entre personas de diferentes regiones, etnias y antecedentes. Este estudio combina

la teoría del paisaje lingüístico y la teoría de la ciudad traductora de Simon para deconstruir el concepto tradicional de *ciudad* y reconstruir uno nuevo desde la perspectiva de la traducción. La investigación analiza las prácticas de traducción en los espacios urbanos de las comunidades de inmigrantes en Yiwu, China, explorando cómo la traducción moldea el paisaje lingüístico, su papel positivo en la innovación cultural y la modernidad urbana, y su impacto en la planificación y política lingüística urbana.

PALABRAS CLAVE: espacio urbano; ciudad traductora; giro hacia fuera; comunidades de inmigrantes; paisaje lingüístico.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cities are social constructs, and as the «Third Code» for cultural exchange (Palumbo 2009), translation dissolves urban boundaries while constructing new ones. In recent years, Sherry Simon has focused on the emerging fields of translation and urban studies. Simon (2012) views translators as mediators of cultural dissemination and exchange, whose activities extend beyond traditional language conversion. All cities are composed of different translation power loci, forming a unique translation space (Simon 2019). The translation strategies of various cities reflect their unique historical and cultural backgrounds, influencing cultural representation and identity construction. In Kolkata, translation has fostered cultural revival and language development; in Trieste, translation works reveal cultural fusion and conflict; in Barcelona, self-translation reflects the complexity of identity; and in Montreal, translation shapes the city's cultural memory and modernity (Simon 2012).

The acceleration of globalization has led to increased international migration and integration, resulting in prominent multilingual landscapes in urban areas. Urban areas serve as dynamic environments where locals, international residents, expatriates, displaced individuals, travelers, and migrants converge, coexisting in a complex interplay of dialogue and conflict, connection and isolation, integration, and diversity (Vidal 2019). As foreigners from around the world settle in Chinese cities, substantial immigrant communities have formed in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (Yu et al. 2016, 36-44). In Beijing, areas such as Wangjing, Wudaokou, and Shunyi, along with Gubei in Shanghai, have developed into communities with relatively high concentrations of Koreans, commonly referred to by locals as «Korea Town» or «Korean Village». In Shanghai and Guangzhou, Japanese communities have formed sizable Japanese enclaves, while African groups have a long-standing history of congregating in Guangzhou, primarily engaging in trade activities. Yiwu, an important trade hub along the Belt and Road Initiative, is a mid-sized county-level city and a key international city in the Yangtze River Delta region. With its notable market advantages, Yiwu attracts tens of thousands of foreign traders annually, many of whom stay long-term, making it an exemplary case for studying immigrant spaces in small and medium-sized cities.

Translation highlights the discordances inherent in city life, yet also opens the door to a shared public discourse, creating a vital space for urban citizenship where the intersection of languages can spark new dialogues (Simon 2016). So, how does the interaction between translation and the city take place in the urban areas we live in? This

study hypothesizes that, in the era of globalization, translation is closely linked to spaces, viewing a contemporary city as more than a physical space but as a text that can be translated. Translation can be defined as negotiation, with the translator acting as a mediator who identifies dissonances between concepts and reproduces the uneven fit between ideas and styles. The principal objective of this study is to illustrate how the contemporary interconnection among mobility, space, and languages contributes to constructing complex identities in cosmopolitan cities, where people live translated and can deterritorialize homogeneous spaces.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research seeks to provisionally examine the developmental process, overarching landscape, and evolving trends of translation in the New Era by utilizing the outward turn of translation (Bassnett and Johnston 2019, 181-88) and integrating translation studies with sociolinguistic theory. Looking outwards (Zwischenberger 2019, 256-68) in translation studies not only guides us in selecting suitable research methodologies and directions but also enhances our comprehension of the nature of translation, extending our vision beyond language and text to explore the non-linguistic functions, values, and roles of translation, thereby promoting the disciplinary development of translation studies.

Linguistic landscape research, as a tool for studying the relationship between language and space, has become a crucial method for depicting social linguistic phenomena and is an essential dimension for understanding the relationship between translation and cities. Linguistic landscapes include not only road signs, markers, and public notices but also various public and private signs within the city (Landry and Bourhis 1997, 23-49). Linguistic landscape research examines the characteristics and rules of language use in real environments, explores the deep-seated political orientations and identity issues behind language choices (Shohamy and Gorter 2009), and reveals key information about a city's cultural characteristics and economic development.

This investigation adopts fieldwork and ethnographic analysis methods, beginning with a field survey conducted in five representative and diverse multilingual immigrant communities in Yiwu, including Binwang, Jimiushan, Futian, Wuai, and Nanyuan. A total of 1500 photos of linguistic landscape were taken in these areas, which are the most densely populated by immigrants, reflecting the unique linguistic practices of Yiwu's immigrant communities. Data sources include official and private signs, covering road signs, store signs, and advertisements. The collected materials were coded based on language type, language form, dominant language, sign creators, and functions, followed by an analysis of the quantity and proportion of various signs. Additionally, 30 residents and passersby from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds were interviewed to understand their perceptions of translation practices in the linguistic landscape. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, the study elaborates on the multilingual and multimodal characteristics of Yiwu's linguistic landscape and people's perceptions of

these features, demonstrating how translation bridges language policies and practices and its role in promoting multilingual coexistence and cross-cultural exchange.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *Multimodality and Multilingualism in Yiwu's Diverse Linguistic Landscape*

The study reveals strong evidence of the multilingualism and diversity of Yiwu's linguistic landscape, as 1050 signs composed of two or more languages account for 70 % of the collected signs. Due to the concentration of international migrants and the presence of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, Yiwu's primary international migrant communities have seen a transformation of their linguistic landscapes. These communities have shifted from a single-language system predominantly in Chinese to a multilingual landscape that includes Chinese, English, Arabic, and Korean. Public signs, shop signs, and street signs in these communities now feature two or more languages. Government-established signs are mainly bilingual in Chinese and English, reflecting the government's language policies and internationalization awareness. Non-governmental signs are more diverse, including bilingual (Chinese-English, Chinese-Korean, and Chinese-Arabic) and multilingual (Chinese-English-Korean-Arabic) signs, indicating the contributions of various institutions and individuals to the multilingual landscape and their service awareness for different linguistic communities.

The presence of different languages on the same sign provides convenience for people from different regions, increasing their sense of belonging to Yiwu and demonstrating the city's high acceptance level of foreign merchants. Moreover, the reasonable use of Arabic, English, and Korean enhances Yiwu's image as a diverse, exotic, and international city. Nevertheless, the prominence of official languages and dominant foreign languages has overshadowed local minority languages like Uyghur, making it challenging for these groups to establish and maintain their cultural identities. Translation is not only a tool for language conversion but also carries the political function of balancing the interests of different language groups. Consequently, a critical issue that arises is how to sustain the vitality of local minority languages within a multilingual context.

Multilingual signs not only use text but also incorporate various semiotic resources such as images, colors, and fonts, forming a multimodal linguistic landscape. For instance, in places frequented by young people, such as near Yiwu Industrial & Commercial College, signs often mix Japanese and Korean characters, reflecting the influence of popular culture. The combination of different semiotics helps us understand the diverse interactions between people, semiotic resources, and objects (Pennycook 2017, 269-82). New vocabulary, expressions, and semiotics continually emerge, showcasing the city's fashion and charm.

3.2. *Social Practices of Translation and Urban Spaces*

The linguistic landscape of Yiwu's immigrant communities reflects the multilingual phenomena arising from transnational population movements in the context of globalization. The rapid development of China's economy and the increasing number of foreigners coming to China have led to the formation of several foreign «sub-communities» in Yiwu, which are, to some extent, the result of immigrants' self-selection based on «ethnic identity». Actors in urban spaces, as producers and receivers of the linguistic landscape, influence and control the production of meaning in the linguistic landscape with their emotions, interests, and intentions (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015). Immigrants are a crucial component of modern cities, and translation plays a vital role in their integration into urban life. The languages displayed on language signs can objectively reflect the language policies and power dynamics among different language user groups (Lee 2013), as well as the cultural identity of the speakers of a particular language. Arabic and Korean are widely used in Yiwu's immigrant communities, reflecting the ethnic and cultural identity of the creators of the linguistic landscape. Superdiversity, which encompasses diversity within diversity, reveals how our contemporary multilingual environments can act as narratives, capturing and reflecting the multifaceted histories and complexities of a locale (Blommaert 2013).

Interviews with respondents from immigrant communities reveal diverse perceptions of translation practices within the linguistic landscape, as they can identify not only the practical functions of multilingual signs but also their cultural significance and symbolic value. Traders from Arab countries generally feel a sense of familiarity when they see Arabic on signs, making them feel that Yiwu is like their second home. Translation serves not only as a tool for information transmission, aiding immigrants in communication and adaptation to new environments, but also as an essential means of cultural expression and identity recognition, allowing different cultural elements to coexist and interact, and endowing urban spaces with new meanings and values.

3.3. *The Role of Translation in Urban Governance*

Urban linguistic landscapes are an essential part of city culture and studying them can enhance our understanding of the cultural connotations and extensions of cities, thereby promoting cultural exchange among people from different regions, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. Co-existing languages in geographically, culturally, and linguistically divided cities connect through translation practices. Through translation, we can become more aware of and take responsibility for our surroundings, asserting our right to diversity while recognizing the fundamental importance of communication within and between communities. In Yiwu's immigrant communities, multilingual landscapes can enhance the sense of belonging for expatriates and promote social harmony.

As a linguistic component of social space, the governance of linguistic landscapes involves planning, coordinating, and guiding the public language environment through an interactive «top-down» and «bottom-up» governance mechanism. Different countries and regions formulate monolingual or multilingual-oriented linguistic landscape policies

based on their national conditions and social development needs, intervening in the linguistic landscape through measures such as mandatory enforcement and economic incentives (Huebner 2006, 31-51). Managing urban linguistic landscapes is a critical urban governance task that involves planning, managing, and maintaining the linguistic environment in public spaces. However, urban linguistic landscape management faces many challenges during urbanization, such as language differences under diverse cultural backgrounds, the mixing or confusion of linguistic environments, and the diverse needs of public spaces (Scollon and Scollon 2003). In the future, as internationalization increases, the role of translation in multilingual landscapes will become more prominent, becoming an essential component of urban language management and services, helping balance urban development with environmental protection to achieve sustainable urban growth.

4.   CONCLUSION

Translation plays a vital role in urban multilingual landscapes, serving as a bridge for cross-cultural exchange and reflecting power relations and social interactions among different language groups. Despite the openness and inclusivity of contemporary international metropolises, they also exhibit characteristics of multilingualism and multicultural coexistence. This study, through the multilingual landscape of foreign communities, reveals the complex relationships between linguistic landscape and socio-economic and cultural identities. The multimodal and multilingual linguistic landscape has shaped Yiwu's diverse and inclusive city image, attracting tourists nationwide and boosting Yiwu's economic development, advancing Yiwu steadily along the path of becoming an international city.

Through reasonable language management and translation services, various languages can coexist harmoniously, fostering understanding and communication among different ethnic groups. Furthermore, translation, as a bridge between different cultures, represents a force for cultural innovation, constructing and shaping cities with lasting influence and serving as a driving force for urban development. In the context of globalization, metropolises should focus on the diversity and inclusivity of linguistic landscape, using scientific language planning and policy guidance to promote the harmonious coexistence of diverse cultures. Future research can further explore multilingual landscapes in other cities and regions, deepening the understanding of translation's role in social interaction and urban language management.

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