

Researching non-standard dialect usage in linguistic landscapes¹

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Introduction

In this paper we consider the use of non-standard dialects in linguistic landscapes, examining various aspects of signage:

- i. In what types of establishments are dialect signs commonly found?
- ii. Who are the ‘senders’ and intended ‘receivers’ in dialect signage?
- iii. When are parallel Standard Japanese translations used and when Standard and dialect are used in tandem, what significance do we find in their order?
- iv. How is inter-dialectal variation treated?
- v. What sort of attitudes towards Standard or local dialects do we find revealed in signage?

Writing an academic paper for an international readership to discuss research in dialectology reveals an inherent handicap. First, the paper is written for an English-reading audience, and yet the subject matter is the Japanese language, of which it cannot be assumed readers have any knowledge. Second, because the data used are signs and the Japanese language does not use a European alphabet, there is yet another layer of difficulty for many readers. Third, since the topic is non-standard varieties of Japanese, even readers familiar with Standard Japanese will require additional explanation.

The concept of linguistic landscape used in this paper is based on ideas developed by Inoue (2005) and Backhaus (2007). In previous papers we have used the term ‘linguascape’, analogous to the term ‘soundscape’, but here we use

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‘linguistic landscape’. It is specifically designed in this paper as having the following five qualities:

- i. It is visual, not aural. It includes signboards and large printing on product packages but not audio information such as announcements in a subway car.
- ii. It is in public spaces, not private; thus it includes a sign in a store window, but not a sign inside a home like ‘God bless our mess’.
- iii. It is aimed at multiple and unspecified readers. It would include a note on a shop door that says ‘back after lunch’, but not such a sign on the door of a home.
- iv. It is information acquired passively. It would include headlines at a newsstand but not articles in a magazine.
- v. It gives us a sense of being in a particular place or which effects our perception of that place.

This study does not employ the ‘formal’ methods of data collecting which Inoue, Backhaus and others have used in which specific geographical boundaries of the research area are delineated and a concerted effort is made to catalogue the signage within them. Rather, we use more ‘casual’ methods in which data collection is not the primary goal; materials were collected while walking, driving, etc. for other purposes. Our analysis is qualitative (identifying factors relevant to variation in signage) rather than quantitative (determining amounts of various types of signage). Aspects of our data collection and analysis are outlined in Japanese in works such as Long (2009, 2010) and Nakai and Long (2011).

One author (Long) has been making photographs of dialect signage he encountered since 2005 and in spite of the fact that we term our method of data collection ‘casual’, the number of dialect signs photographed is currently 4360. Of these, 3162 signs are in the Ryukyu language (or dialect) area of Japan, consisting of the Okinawa and Amami Islands. This area is interesting both because the islands’ traditional language varieties are mutually unintelligible with the Tokyo (standard) dialect and because their independent historical situation has led to a unique identity within the modern Japanese nation state.

Areas of usage for dialects in signage

One factor of interest to sociolinguists is the type of venue in which dialect signage is found. In the Okinawa and Amami Islands of Japan, we find three areas in which dialect figures prominently:

- i. Welcome signs, souvenir shops, and signage in heavy tourist areas.
- ii. Services related to the elderly, such as day services, retirement homes, hot springs, chiropractic massage etc., but interestingly absent from pharmacies.
- iii. Public safety (*don't drive drunk, children don't run out into the street, etc.*).

Figure 1 is an example of mobile linguistic landscape in the form of a bus advertisement for a company named *Uutootoo* (the Okinawan phrase spoken to one's ancestors at graves and family altars) that provides cleaning for graves and catering for ancestor memorials. Figure 2 is a public safety sign, showing a young girl about to run in front of a moving car in pursuit of a dog, captioned *ukaasandu* ('danger' in Okinawan). Incidentally, the sign is covered with graffiti, but it does not relate to the sign, nor the fact that the sign uses dialect.



Figure 1: Grave cleaning advertisement



Figure 2: Traffic safety poster

Senders and receivers in dialect signs

A second factor of linguistic landscapes we can examine is the 'senders' and 'receivers' of the messages in dialect signage. Who has created the sign (the sender) and for what sort of prospective reader (receiver)? For example, we found a preponderance of dialect signage that does not appear to be aimed at speakers of the dialect but rather at outsiders. It seems counterintuitive to make signs aimed at people who can not understand them. However, we interpret this behavior in the context of the 'commercialization of dialects' as one element of the 'tourism resources' of a region.

The signs in Figures 1 and 2 can clearly be seen as aimed at local residents (and people with at least a partial knowledge of the local dialect). The same lo-

cal readership cannot be assumed for the next three signs we examine. Figure 3 is an airport gift shop display for an Okinawan cheese cake called *faimiiru* ‘eat (try) some’, the Okinawan dialect equivalent of the Standard Japanese (SJ) *tabete mite*. The spelling *faimeal* uses a pun on the English word *meal*. Figure 4 is a souvenir shop named *haisai* station, using the Okinawa equivalent of SJ *konnichiwa* ‘hello’. Figure 5 says ‘food zone’ but *Washita* (SJ *watashitachi* ‘our’) sells food as souvenirs, not as groceries. Both shops are located on the touristy *Kokusai* (‘international’) Street.



Figure 3: *Faimeal Cheese Cake*



Figure 4: *Haisai Station souvenirs*



Figure 5: *Washita Shop (food items for souvenirs)*

Presence of Standard language translations

A third factor of interest is whether a Standard translation of the dialect is presented or the dialect is used by itself. The presence of a Standard translation

leaves the receiver of the message with a different impression than if it were absent. The question should also be raised, which is more prominent (i.e., which message is primary and which is secondary?)? Some differences which leave the message receiver with the impression one message is primary and another is secondary include message order (the message that comes first is perceived as primary while the one which follows —sometimes set off by parentheses— is seen as secondary, message size (the bigger message is primary, the smaller secondary), etc. When Local Language Variety (LLV) is primary and SJ is secondary, the message receiver is left with an impression like ‘the LLV is the genuine word the concept, but we will provide a SJ translation for those of you who are unable to understand the LLV’. On the other hand, when the SJ is primary, the reader is left with an impression like ‘The SJ word is presented as the genuine word, and the LLV is thrown in as an afterthought, so that the reader can learn one of the quaint local words’.

Figure 6 is a explanatory board in a museum which uses SJ translations alongside dialect words. The following is a rough translation. ‘*Sawara* trident fishing’. In the dialect of Amami, *sawara* are called *soora* or *sora*. They are large fish which can grow to a length of two meters. They are voracious eaters, and some unusual fishing techniques exploit this trait. *Tugya* (*mitsumata yasu*) is used to spear the fish in the water.’

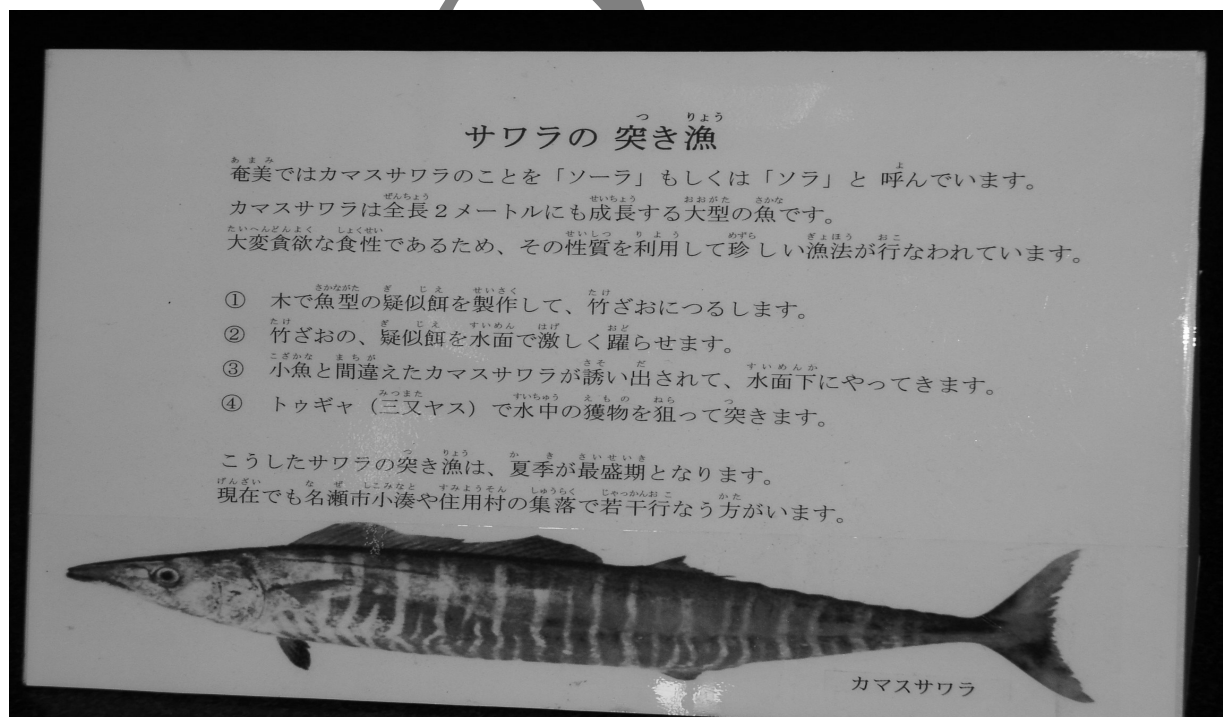


Figure 6: Museum explanation using dialect and Standard Japanese

Sawara is the SJ word for the fish ‘wahoo’. *Tugya* is the Amami dialect word for a trident spear, and *mitsumata yasu* is the SJ word. In the explanation of yahoo, the SJ word *sawara* comes first and the local words follow as explanation. With trident spear, the local word is presented first, giving the reader that this is the ‘real word’ and that the SJ is simply an explanation. When standard translations of dialect words are provided, the order makes a difference in the impression given to the reader.

Treatment of inter-dialectal variation

The topic of variation is inherent in dialect signage because there is variation between the dialect and the standard variety, but quite often the reality is that variation exists within the dialect as well. This inter-dialectal variation is a fourth factor of interest. Although such variation is often completely ignored in signage, we do find some interesting examples of it being dealt with. The museum explanation in Figure 6 is a case of inter-dialectal variation being overtly acknowledged, with the variants *soora* and *sora* (with a long vowel and short vowel).

Dialect attitudes in dialect signage

Signage can reveal interesting local attitudes towards Standard and dialectal varieties. This is our fifth topic of interest. The photos in Figures 7 and 8 are of an Okinawan sweet whose name varies depending on the type of place is being marketed.



Figure 7: Sato Tempura



Figure 8: Saataa Andagii

Figure 7 bears the English translation ‘sweetpotato sugarball’, a moniker which observation around the Okinawa region indicates is an idiosyncratic translation that the maker of this particular sign came up with. The Japanese words used in the two photos, however, show a clear pattern of differentiated usage. The food itself is a sugar-covered, deep fried ball of dough (golf ball to tennis ball-sized) that is sometimes flavored with raisins. It may be helpful to people in some parts of the English-speaking world to think of it as a sweet hush puppy. In places like the Bonin Islands, a similar food (probably coincidental rather than historically related) is referred to as *shima* (‘island’) *donuts*. The term *sato tempura* (literally ‘deep-fried sugar’) uses two SJ words. In this photo, the term is used directly in front of the product so any native speaker would be able to deduce its meaning. Otherwise, the combination of these words would leave the uninitiated reader baffled. On the other hand, the term *saataa andagii* consists of two Okinawan dialect words, which although etymologically related to the Standard Japanese noun *sato* and verb *ageru* ‘to deep fry’, are completely incomprehensible to a reader unfamiliar with the dialect.

With this background information, we are now ready for the sociolinguistically interesting phenomenon which relates to the contexts within which the two terms are found. The primary function of language is to convey a message. This means that in cases where one could choose between a standard language or widely-used term and a regionally-limited (dialect) one, we would expect them to choose the former. We, as sociolinguistics, however, are aware—from research and simple real-world observation—that the latter has its appeal as well. This appeal is usually limited to in-group situations where dialect (or minority language) knowledge can be taken for granted and expressions of solidarity are valued, even over the risk of not being understood by outsiders. With this in mind, if told that one of the signs was in a heavy tourist location and the other in an out of the way local grocery, the logical assumption would be that the former was Figure 7 and the latter Figure 8. This assumption would be incorrect and herein lies the sociolinguistically interesting aspects of the two signs. The SJ sign (Figure 7) was in a supermarket where few tourists venture and the dialect sign (Figure 8) was in a souvenir shop whose signs boast ‘we ship nation-wide’. Moreover, these two signs are far from being anomalies. Dozens of signs cataloged by the authors, as well as casual interviews with Okinawans, corroborate this type of differentiated usage. Makers of signs such as the one in Figure 8 have made the decision that the risk of the dialect word not being understood is outweighed by the benefits of using a word with local color. Makers of signs such as that in Figure 7, on the other hand, have opted for the use of a term they perceive to be SJ (even though it is not) over any possible benefits of using the local term, which also would be widely comprehended by local readers.

The two signs then provide a visually convincing example of a socio-psychological shift which has been occurring in Okinawa over the past couple of decades. The Okinawans, realizing that their traditional dialect is on the verge of disappearing, have chosen to revive it, but rather than using it in every day conversation among themselves, they continue their shift towards SJ usage and have appropriated the dialect as a linguistic tourism resource.

Future research questions

In this paper, we outlined a few factors of sociolinguistic interest to dialect researchers in the field of linguistic landscapes. As often happens in research, analysis leads to further questions. Questions for future research include the following. What orthographic adjustments are made in an attempt to represent non-standard dialects for which a preordained orthography does not exist? (This question was examined in Long 2010.) What role does the linguistic ‘distance’ (difference) between the local dialect and the standard play in the likelihood that dialects will be incorporated into signage, and how likely is it that an uninformed outside reader will be able to deduce the meaning? The exploration of these topics, as well as comparisons between dialect linguascapes in different language groups, should serve to expand both the breadth and depth of linguascape research in the near future.

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