

An exploratory study on the linguistic landscape of Quezon City during the COVID-19 pandemic*

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the construction of public space. One of the most prominent is the signs and notices from authorities and commercial establishments about following health and safety protocols. A crucial aspect of these signs is language choice. This exploratory study investigates the role of language vis-à-vis COVID-19 signs by using data collected from 2020-21, which consists of photographs of public signs from various establishments and residence within different areas of Quezon City. Following a linguistic landscape approach, the study distinguishes between top-down and bottom-up signs, which represent governmental institutions and commercial spaces and private parties respectively. The study notes the correlation of language choice and the type of sign. That is, top-down signs generally adopt monolingual signs that orient towards English over Filipino while bottom-up signs utilize monolingual Tagalog and mix Tagalog and English. Furthermore, in terms of the placement of the languages, Tagalog is often positioned on top as the main language. Lastly, the study identifies the functions of the signs. The signs are predominantly used for instruction (e.g., enforcing the Philippine government's health protocols), persuasion (e.g., it is good to keep one's self healthy), and communicating information (e.g., reduced service hours due to the pandemic).

Keywords: linguistic landscapes, space, signages, COVID-19 pandemic

1. INTRODUCTION

As of the writing of this study, it has been almost three years since the World Health Organization (WHO) officially announced the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11th, 2020. Governments have adopted measures, among them lockdowns, travel bans, and implementation of health and safety protocols that have reorganized the ways people go about their everyday lives (Bali et.al. 2022). These changes are also reflected in the physical environment. Public spaces, to some degree, have been reterritorialized as a response to the global pandemic. This is visibly reflected in the presence of various signs that encourage (and enforce) compliance with health protocols such as wearing masks, social distancing, and hand washing. This study explores signs depicting COVID-19 health and safety protocols in Quezon City, Philippines from 2020 to 2021 and the ways in which language varieties are utilized for various communicative effects.

The Philippines has two official languages: English and (Tagalog-based) Filipino and has 14 major languages that are considered as “mother tongue” languages (Monje 2017). The place of English in contemporary Philippine society is an outcome of colonization and years of institutionalization through language policy and continues to hold a privileged

position in different spheres of public life which is in asymmetric relationships with Filipino and other languages in the country (Tupas 2004).

A number of studies have examined how relationships among language varieties are reproduced and mapped onto public spaces through a linguistic landscape approach (LL). In brief, LL examines the presence and/or absence of languages in public signs (e.g., billboards, store signs) in a given territory (Landry & Bourhis 1997). LL studies set in the Philippines are sparse and have largely focused on the dominance and functions of English. For instance, Magno (2017) examines the linguistic landscape of five higher educational institutions in Cebu, Philippines and notes the predominance of English monolingual signs. Ellaga and Valdez (2020) more recently examined health communication in signs in barangay health centers in Lucena City, Quezon, Philippines. They identified specific types of discourses and how these territorialize a space that facilitates healthscapes. The study also adopts the view of space as a semiotic construction. Specifically, Quezon city's linguistic landscape underwent processes of reterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) that is contingent on social, political and linguistic activities shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although these few studies about LLs in the Philippines establish the sociolinguistic configuration of languages in the

country, language use in signs within the context of COVID-19 have yet to receive scholarly attention. As such, this exploratory study seeks to provide initial findings about how COVID-19 measures are communicated in a variety of public signs in different parts of Quezon City.

The study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) what languages are used in the COVID-19 signs and (2) what functions do these languages fulfill in the context of crisis communication? The study investigates various spaces in Quezon City rather than a particular establishment (e.g., a mall) as a way of providing a preliminary sketch of how parts of the city underwent reterritorialization due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study takes a linguistic landscape approach (LL) in its analysis of COVID-19 signs. In this study, the signs are limited to fixed signs (e.g., posters, notices, signboards). Due to the various mobility restrictions imposed by the Philippine government as part of the *cordon sanitaire* measures against the virus (i.e., the enhanced community quarantine imposed incrementally in Metro Manila from March 2020 until November 2021), the data gathered for this study was limited to a collection of photographs that were taken by the authors themselves and crowdsourced from student contributions, which amounted to a corpus of 113 signs (each signage that appears in a photograph are counted as individual tokens.). Since the majority of the data were various signs in Quezon City, the authors chose to limit the scope of the LL studied to this particular area. The mobility restrictions also meant that individuals are allowed outdoors only for a limited amount of time which made it difficult to gather extensive data on a specific space or locale. As such, this exploratory study does not claim that these signs are representative samples of Quezon City's LL during this period; rather, it provides a starting point for investigating how the Philippine government utilized language to implement its various COVID-19 containment measures during the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) period.

The study adopted a multimodal orientation in its analysis of the signs. Rather than focus solely on the number of language varieties that appear on signs, attention is also given to the ways in which these linguistic choices co-occur with other semiotic resources such as color, size, layout, images (Hopkyns & van den Hoven 2021). Moreover, the study notes the emplacement and social context of the signs, specifically where the signs are put on display and the producer and intended/actual audience. Doing so aids in situating the semiotic choices vis-à-vis COVID-19 messaging. Specifically, linguistic and visual choices in

signs predominantly reinforce discourses of securitization that construct space as risky and position officials, citizens, and establishments in particular ways. However, a small number of signs convey messages of care and concern as alternative discourses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Top-down and bottom-up signs

Expectedly, COVID-19 signs used the official languages: English and Filipino-- the former being the most dominant. English use in public signs are largely top-down signs. By this, we mean signs that are circulated by an official source (Backhaus 2007). Fig. 1 shows a tarpaulin put on display at a police headquarters in Quezon City. The sign conveys measures that must be followed while within the premises of the police camp. The sign utilizes English as a means of conveying an instruction to the reader which presupposes not just English literacy but also the hegemonic status of English, as the language is not commonly used in everyday interactions locally. On the other hand, Fig. 2 utilizes Filipino in communicating a health advisory concerning COVID-19. Similar to Fig. 1, the sign is a top-down sign that relays a message from the Philippine Department of Health (DOH). The code choice utilizes a formal register of Filipino which signals that the message is official and indexes the authority of the DOH.

Top-down signs deploy English and Filipino as monolingual codes, which reinforce ideas that monolingualism is to facilitate clear communication and to index formality. At the same time, English dominates top-down signs, reinforcing notions that English is the language of authority superseding Filipino. This sociolinguistic hierarchy vis-à-vis the government's response to COVID-19 reflects the urgency of constraining possible readings of signs that are attuned towards strict compliance with protocols, but at the same time, these choices overlook the presence of speakers of other languages.

Taglish also appears on top-down signs (Fig. 3). The poster in Fig. 3 utilizes both Filipino and English to effect intersentential code-switching. While Taglish generally communicates casualness or informality (especially in spoken discourse), the accompanying modalities present in the sign mitigate this typified association. This is because the text size, color, and placement creates demarcations. Coloring lexical items increase/decrease their sizes and segmenting them within the tarpaulin affects the salience of the linguistic units. These visual cues contribute to intersentential codeswitching as they visually create boundaries between English and

Filipino words. As such, the sign replicates linguistic ideologies about monolingualism as the ideal mode for communicating official discourse and authority.

qualities are partially constructed through the use of English, which index aspirational affects. Meanwhile, the materiality of the sign suggests that it has been professionally made, reinforcing the space's class consciousness. It should be noted however that mall operations during this period were largely constrained by government health protocols. This layered influence is reflected in the signs that emphasize compliance to safety rather than active or passive consumption, positioning malls as partners in enforcing securitization of space.



Fig.1. Health protocol tarpaulin

Fig. 5 shows a bottom up sign placed in a residential area that issues a warning. The use of Filipino may be attributed to audiences within the immediate environment. Moreover, the use of Filipino may also be a way of emphatically reinforcing the urgency of the message. That is, by communicating the importance of wearing a face mask through a language that is widely understood, the sign is able to highlight the importance of the warning. The emphatic quality of the message is supported by the accompanying visual. The use of the coffin and the image of the grim reaper both communicate the undesirable future that results in one's failure to follow mask-wearing protocols. Another intended effect of the visual is to elicit humor from the onlookers. The emplacement of the sign on the street may be interpreted as an empathic but also an absurd and exaggerated way to convey the reality of contracting COVID-19. That is, if residents refuse to wear their face masks when going outside, COVID-19 will land them inside a coffin where Death (as the grim reaper) will come and get them.

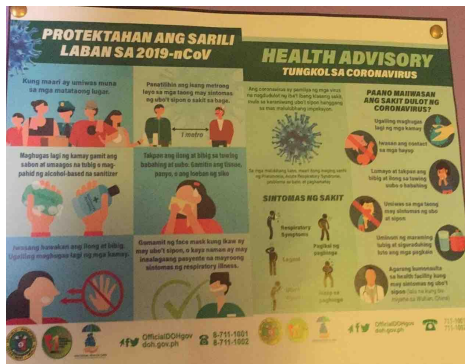


Fig. 2. Health advisory poster on COVID-19

In terms of the materials used in creating these signs, Fig 6 shows a sign, more specifically a piece of paper, posted in a *barangay* hall, in contrast to the more durable materials shown in Figs. 4 and 5. The sign utilizes a combination of intrasentential and intersentential code-switching which achieves a similar effect as spoken discourse and may index a feeling of casualness. This casualness is manifested by the sentence structures, as majority of the texts are directives and the message is conveyed through the use of all capitalized letters, which visually resembles yelling. Thus, the use of Taglish facilitates ease of communication. Pivoting for a moment regarding the materiality of the sign, the use of paper suggests low production, which may lessen the authority of the announcement. However, the use of paper may also correlate with the scale of communication, given that the text is about transactions at the *barangay*-level. Paper can be used to create the sign as it is meant only for fewer people—the people residing within the *barangay* (as also seen in Fig. 3). Hence, in contrast to top-down signs, it can be seen that bottom-up signs utilize linguistic and multimodal resources in a more varied manner. Linguistically, bottom-up signs show



Fig. 3. Market days advisory in Taglish

The second category is bottom-up signs, which are signs that are created by private, commercial actors. Fig. 4 for instance shows a sign inside a shopping mall utilizing a monolingual code. While the use of English in health communication has been noted as a strategy of inclusion in multilingual settings, the use of English in this context may also be attributed to the emplacement of the sign: the mall (Hopkyns & van den Hoven 2021). While predominantly a space for consumerism, malls in the country also have symbolic functions. Particularly, malls represent affluence, comfort, and security. These

orientation to monolingualism but also to code-switching (albeit not to a large degree).



Fig. 4. Health protocol sign in a shopping mall



Fig. 5. Warning sign in a residential area

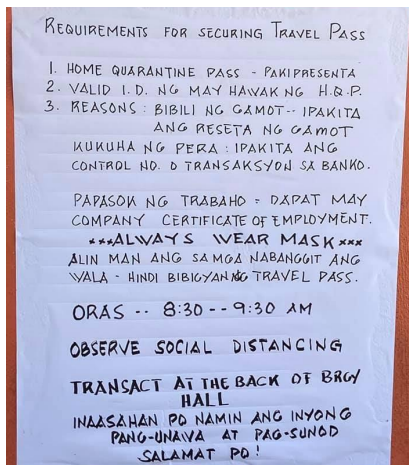


Fig. 6. Travel pass protocols in a *barangay* hall

3.2 Functions of COVID-19 Signs

In addition to describing dominant linguistic choices, the study provides a sketch of recurrent functions of COVID-19 signs. Predictably, instructing

the public about health and safety protocols is the most represented function of COVID-19 signs in the corpus. As seen in Figs. 2 and 4, signs convey explicit directives that should curb the spread of COVID-19. The signs enumerate actions and behaviors such as wearing masks and face shields and keeping social distance. As was done elsewhere, maintaining public health safety is framed as a priority measure. Non-compliance to these measures makes any violator a health and safety threat to those individuals who comply with the protocols (Fig. 2).

Furthermore, in addition to linguistic elements, visual resources are utilized to convey the health guidelines. Vector art is utilized to present instructions in an immediate and understandable manner. The font types and sizes used make the signs easy to read. Hence, the signs do not utilize intricate images and instead use simple designs and fonts, which makes them easier to decipher for the general public. Through these, signmakers place an onus on the reader to protect themselves from the virus. Readers who fail to follow these positions them as obstinate citizens, or *pasaway*. Crucially, this violation also turns readers into targets for disciplining and policing, which are informed by deep-seated class resentments (Hapal 2021).

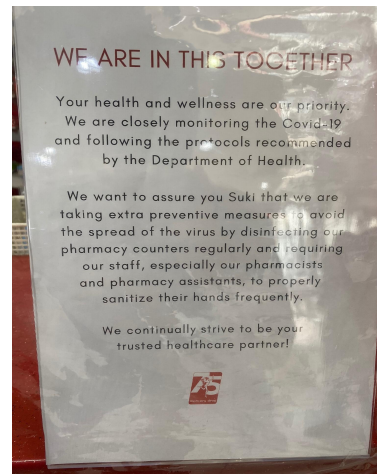


Fig. 7. Advisory about ongoing COVID-19 protocols

Another communicative function of COVID-19 signs is expressions of affect. Specifically, establishments utilize discursive strategies that elicit feelings of comfort and reassurance for their patrons. In Fig. 7, we see a bottom-up sign from a pharmacy in Quezon City that provides a caring message to its clients in addition to emphasizing the measures that the store is taking to ensure safe transactions. Linguistically, the sign uses deictics to position the reader and the establishment as partners in curbing the virus. For instance, the text utilizes inclusive “we” in the beginning of the text to establish solidarity with the reader. While the latter part of the texts delineate

the difference between the pharmacy management and its customers (i.e., exclusive use of “we” and the pronoun “you”), effecting this distinction also contributes to establishing the accountability of the company regarding national COVID-19 health and safety protocols which creates a feeling of security among its consumers. Moreover, the use of a direct address through the pronoun “you” as a grammatical object and the Filipino word *suki* (a loyal customer) involves the reader in the interaction and positions them as being recipients of the subject's actions. As such, the affective discourse expressed communicates a kind of redeployment of the language that challenges the ways it is predominantly used by top-down signs (e.g., communicating health and safety protocols) and instead positions it as a language of care and empathy, albeit framed within commercial interests.

Lastly, COVID-19 signs fulfill an informational function. Signs communicate relevant information about COVID-19 and policies to readers. For instance, Fig. 8 shows a sign that identifies the symptoms of the virus. The sign is straight-forward in that it uses keywords predominantly in conveying information rather than sentences and similar to Fig. 2 and Fig. 4 utilizes simple images. In addition to communicating information about COVID-19 prevention, a select number of signs also emphasize travel restrictions. This is illustrated in Fig. 9 where a bottom up sign placed in a residential area in Quezon City also provides information on the specific times that people are allowed outdoors to buy goods from the local market. The sign encapsulates the broader strategy of containment measures that the Philippine government took in addressing the COVID-19 in the country. That is, the Philippine government framed the virus as a security threat in addition to it being a public health issue. This unique approach is even more highlighted with the appointment of military men to the various task forces overseeing the management of the pandemic which have led to policies about mobility that are displayed in Fig. 9 (Ferrerias 2021).

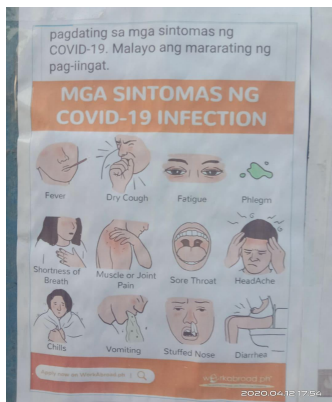


Fig. 8. Poster depicting COVID-19 symptoms

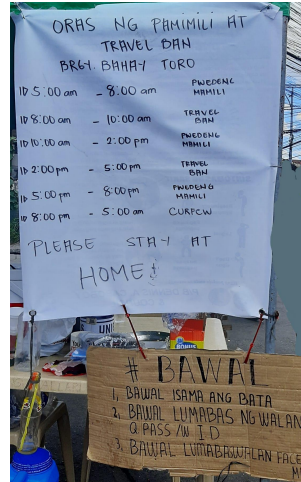


Fig. 9. Sign depicting travel and mobility bans

4. CONCLUSION

This exploratory examination of the LL of Quezon City provided a sketch of how the COVID-19 pandemic reterritorialized public spaces while Metro Manila was in the highest level of community quarantine (the enhanced community quarantine, before the national government switched to the alert level system) from 2020-21. The study showed how the pandemic reinforces the hegemonic status of English in the Philippines as it remains the preferred linguistic variety in crisis communication for both top-down and bottom-up signs. While Filipino is well represented in the corpus, its use correlates with establishing solidarity or rapport with the reader as opposed to establishing the authority of the sign makers. These linguistic choices that reproduce the language ideologies about monolingualism and authority work in concert with the broader response of the Philippine government that required full compliance of citizens. That is, using the official language and embedding them in public signs to reterritorialize places such as Quezon City may be interpreted as material manifestations of the Philippine government's draconian measures in its approach to contain the spread of COVID-19, wherein violations of which may lead to arrests.

Due to the constraints of time and space, the study is not comprehensive, nor does it provide a generalizable account of the ways COVID-19 influenced the public display of languages and the reconstruction of public spaces. However, in sketching out tendencies in linguistic and visual choices, the study hopes to have illustrated the informational and symbolic role that signs play as the Philippines—including both its government and citizens—continue to confront the socio-economic effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the constraints to mobility during the period when the data was collected, future studies may seek to collect publicly available images on various platforms (e.g., social media, media organizations, etc) as well as conducting interviews with residents of a particular locale to gain ethnographic insight about how they occupied and interacted with public spaces and signs during this period. Understanding how the behavior of individuals were influenced by public signs that enforce compliance with the government's health measures may provide a fuller account of how official discourses are taken up, embodied, negotiated, and challenged within the Philippine government's framing of the COVID-19 pandemic as an existential threat and its response as a form of warfare.

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