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Language ideological debates about linguistic landscapes: The case of Chinese signage in Richmond, Canada

Abstract

In 2013, Richmond city council was presented with a petition calling for the regulation of all language signs, drawing national attention to the amount of Chinese-only signage. The signage debate has become well-known in Canada as a result of the media, which has provided a platform for debate through online reader commentary. By applying concepts from linguistic landscapes, language ideologies and nationalism in addition to analytical tools from SFL, we employ critical discourse studies to examine how representations of and responses to language signage in online news commentary contribute to the construction of in-groups and out-groups in the Canadian context. Findings show that stereotypical representations of ethnicity and culture are represented as a threat to the Canadian status quo. Also, contradictory ideologies of Canadian official bilingualism are employed to justify discrimination against Chinese language speakers. Findings suggest that language ideologies remain deeply tied to understandings of Canadian nationhood and belonging.

Keywords: Canada; Chinese; English; online comments; language ideology; linguistic landscapes

Introduction

In 2011, Kerry Starchuk, a resident of the city of Richmond, Canada, started to campaign the city council to endorse a bylaw to curb Chinese-only commercial signs in that city (Todd 2012). Officials acknowledged that although many residents were “upset by the large Chinese-only signs (COS) being erected in the city”, the issue had been removed from the

agenda of the intercultural advisory committee because it was seen as “overkill” (Todd 2012). Nonetheless, the campaign grew and continued into 2013, when city council was presented with a 1000-signature petition, proposing that the city adopt an official policy similar to that of the local Aberdeen Mall, which “requires at least 70 per cent of signs to be English/French and the remaining 30 per cent a language of the retailer’s choice” (Hager 2013). Although the campaign received the support of one city councillor, the remainder of the council voted against referring the matter on for further consideration (Hager 2013). By this time, however, the campaign had drawn national attention to the amount of Chinese-only language signage in this suburb of the capital of British Columbia, Vancouver, where only 30% of residents have English as a first language (Richmond City Council 2016).

The city of Richmond is situated on the West coast of Canada, far removed to the heartland of traditional Canadian language debates, which have tended to take place in Ontario (home to a substantial population of French and English speakers), Quebec (home to the majority of Canadian French speakers), and New Brunswick (Canada’s only officially bilingual province) (see Heller 1999). Although French and English are Canada’s official languages (*Constitution Act 1982*, s. 33; *Official Languages Act R.S.C. 1985*, c. 31 (4th Supp)), only 18% of Canadians are actually bilingual in English and French, and most of these bilinguals (58%) live in Quebec (Statistics Canada 2016). On the West coast of Canada, French is not widely spoken; of Richmond’s 197,255 residents, only 1,015 (0.5% of the population) have French as a first language. In contrast, speakers of Chinese language varieties comprise over 50% of the population: 20% of residents are first-language Cantonese speakers and 18% are first-language Mandarin speakers (Richmond City Council 2016). In fact, the population is growing: the 2016 census showed that Cantonese and Mandarin mother tongue speakers have increased by 43.5% and 90.8%, respectively, since the last census in 2011. In contrast, the

numbers of English and French mother tongue speakers have decreased by 5.9% and 9%, respectively, over the same time period (Richmond City Council 2016).

Given these changing demographics, it is unsurprising that debates about the language of public signage remain salient. In late 2014, Richmond City Council reopened a debate on banning Chinese-only public signage, but ultimately rejected any language restrictions. The issue resurfaced in 2015 when, after much debate, the city decided to take an outreach approach: a sign inspector was to encourage business owners to use more English to enhance their marketing (Britten 2017). However, by 2017 the issue was making headlines again: while working on a city by-law mainly aimed at de-cluttering windows and clarifying what language signage could be requested, one city councillor introduced an amendment calling for any sign to bear a minimum of 50 per cent of one of the official languages; the motion passed five to four.

The story has become widely known nationally as a result of the media, which have not only disseminated the story but also provided a platform for debate through online reader commentary. Citizens' opinions on the signage, as expressed through the media, provide a unique opportunity to engage in the field of linguistic landscapes. The study of linguistic landscapes, or displays of visible written language, has traditionally involved examinations of the evolving role of language and semiosis in specific geographic spaces. Early studies in linguistic landscapes (e.g. Landry and Bourhis 1997) demonstrated the usefulness of mapping the linguistic composition of a community, on the one hand, and defining linguistic boundaries between language communities, on the other. Linguistic landscape studies have also shed light on how language groups compete for legitimation in a linguistically diverse society (ibid.). Furthermore, according to Blommaert (2013: 1-3), the study of language

signage is important because signs serve to index social, cultural and political patterns and as such can “become a diagnostic of social, cultural and political structures”. This paper focuses not on the signs *per se*, but rather on how citizens *represent* and *respond to* language signage as reported in the media. This can be considered indicative of the ‘experiential’ dimension of space, i.e. the lived space of inhabitants (Trumper-Hecht 2010) or, for those who do not live in this space, the imagination of it (Mitchell 2010). With this focus, the paper examines the attitudes towards and perceptions of the landscape itself.

Studying perceptions of and attitudes towards signs can serve as a way of gauging the impact and coherence of social change, which can be discerned through discussions of identity, unity, multiculturalism, and language diversity, policy, and rights (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010). Since social actors not only respond to linguistic landscapes but also shape them (Lou 2010), studying debates about multilingual signage is revealing of what societal changes are taking place or should be anticipated. In an increasingly interconnected and online world, debates often take place in the media, which can usefully serve as “sensitive barometers of cultural change” (Fairclough 1995: 60) and are powerful tools for characterising – and mischaracterising – linguistic landscapes (Mitchell 2010). Here, we argue that online media coverage of and individuals’ commentary about these issues are important barometers of change not only in the specific linguistic landscape in question, but also in wider society more generally. More specifically, the debate over the linguistic landscape in Richmond B.C. might be indicative of perceptions of and attitudes towards official and non-official languages in Canada as a whole.

The aim of this paper is to identify attitudes towards languages within the context of the Richmond language signage debate in order to explore potential implications for the

coherence and sustainability of established/traditional Canadian national identity and values.

The following research questions are addressed:

- What attitudes and ideologies are expressed towards Canadian official and non-official languages in the context of the Richmond signage debate?
- How are these attitudes and ideologies discursively framed with relation to extralinguistic sociopolitical factors (e.g. national identity, language rights, multiculturalism)?

This paper proceeds as follows. First, the Canadian context in which the debate over signage took place is introduced. Then, the data and methods are presented and the research procedures are outlined. The paper then turns to the main findings before concluding.

Canadian nationalism and languages

Canada is well-known for its language ideological debates (Heller 1999). Policies establishing bilingualism and multiculturalism (Official Languages Act R.S.C. 1985, c. 31 (4th Supp); Multiculturalism Act R.S.C. 1985, c. 24 (4th Supp.)) emerged in the mid-20th century as a way of unifying a country fractured by geography, language, and heritage.

Canada consists of a “state-nation”: a polyethnic state which has sought to create a sense of nationhood by using policies to enhance national unity. With the Multiculturalism Act, Canada’s official culture became multiculturalism and the original European colonisers (French and English) were no longer given special status as the “two founding nations”.

Instead of founding nations, minority groups were also recognised as playing important roles in the historic evolution of the country. Immigrants, too, were encouraged to contribute to the development of Canada by celebrating their diverse cultures within the Canadian “mosaic”.

Although the French and English were not given precedence culturally, they were recognised

through language policies that made English and French the official languages of the federal government.

However, neither bilingualism nor multiculturalism policies have been uniformly popular amongst the general population (Kymlicka 2004). French-English bilingualism hardly seems to capture the essence of Canada when more than 20% of Canadians have a non-official language as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada 2016). Also, official bilingualism glosses over the diverse varieties of English and French spoken across the country (for an overview, see Edwards 1998). Furthermore, official bilingualism reflects only two European languages, which arguably silences the voice of the indigenous people. Also, previous research (e.g. AUTHOR 2016) has suggested that monolingual rather than multilingual ideologies tend to circulate in English- and French-speaking Canadian media.

Canada is also a country with distinct regional identities (Taylor 1993). Although the policies of pan-Canadian national identity allow diverse cultures to share a common identity and two common languages (Kymlicka, 2004), diversity itself is dissimilar from coast to coast.

Immigration patterns have differed historically across Canada, and these cemented in regional East-West, North-South, and centre-periphery divisions. Immigration patterns continue to differ as the regular influx of immigrants settle in different parts of this very large country.

Notably, French speakers have never comprised large proportions of the population in Western Canada, and the French language is not widely spoken there. Instead, Chinese speakers have comprised a growing population since the 19th century when Chinese labourers completed the British Columbia section of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Although 10,000 Chinese workers arrived between 1881 and 1884, in 1885 the government introduced the Chinese Immigration Act, which imposed a head tax of \$50 that applied only to Chinese

immigrants; this tax was raised to \$100 in 1900 and \$500 in 1903 (Guo 2013). Despite the overtly racist immigration policy, today the population of Canadians with Chinese heritage is over 1.3 million (Statistics Canada 2016). Thus, while the Richmond signage debate throws into relief commonsense (ideological) notions about language and culture, it also highlights perceptions of what it means to be Canadian and live in Canada.

Language ideology and nationalism

Language ideologies are a useful theoretical framework from which to approach the Richmond signage debate. Language ideologies refer to beliefs about language shared by members of a community that come to be so well established that they are taken to be “common sense” (Woolard 1998). These are often strongly tied to notions of belonging and have been used throughout history as a way of legitimising the existence (i.e. creation or independence) of a nation. Sharing a common “national” language has, in fact, been seen to be one of the hallmarks of nationhood (Anderson 1983).

As mentioned above, Canada has two official languages; it is also a “state-nation” in that its political (geographic) boundaries preceded any form of inherent social unity. Since Canada bucks the traditional monolingual nation-state trend, nationalism and nationalist discourse are important to help maintain Canadian unity. Here, “nationalism” is understood to be an ideology that helps to imagine, conceptualize and understand the nation (Anderson 1983). In other words, it is *nationalism* that creates the *nation*, not the other way around (Gellner 1983). The shared imagining of the nation takes place through *nationalist discourse*, i.e. discourse through which national identity is produced, reproduced and transformed.

Nationalist discourse becomes especially important when it is transmitted via the media, which not only broadcasts the national language itself, but also the language ideologies therein (AUTHOR 2011; AUTHOR 2016) and myths, traditions, symbols and values that become the cornerstones of discourses facilitating images and feelings of belonging and patriotism. In a country like Canada, where understandings about the nation are intertwined with language ideologies, the media have played an important role in creating connections between the diverse areas and people of Canada (Raboy 1991). Vipond (2012: 12) remarks that networks of communication, fostered by the mass media, have been central to “both the material and mythological definition of Canada”. The national broadcaster, in particular, is a powerful institution with the potential to create an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) out of what is ultimately a geographically, ethnically and linguistically fragmented country (Charland 1986; Raboy 1991).

In particular, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has been historically vested with the task of safeguarding Canadian national identity and unity (Vipond 2008). The Canadian Broadcasting Act (S.C. 1991, c. 11) states that the programming provided by the CBC should, among other things, “be predominantly and distinctively Canadian, reflect Canada and its regions to national and regional audiences, while serving the special needs of those regions”; also, the CBC should “contribute to shared national consciousness and identity”. The mandate of the CBC is perhaps complicated by the fact that it has increased opportunities for interactivity: most news stories on the website have commenting options. While such interactivity facilitates the ease with which Canadians can interact irrespective of their home base (thus overcoming geographic divides), it also can serve as an important site for debates over what it means to be Canadian. In other words, commentary forums can contribute to shared national consciousness and identity through the opportunities for exchange of beliefs

about Canada and Canadian national identity both *via* a national language and through *focus on* language issues (AUTHOR 2016). The fact that the forums selected here for analysis focus on signage is not incidental; rather, it suggests the far-reaching experiential effects of linguistic landscapes and the potential for them to be *de-*, *re-* and *entextualised* by direct audiences as well as by “overhearers” (Angermeyer 2017 after Goffman) for the purpose of justifying social inclusion and exclusion.

Data and methods

Data are drawn from a CBC.ca news article in addition to comments on that news article published by the CBC and republished by the Canadian Yahoo news website <https://ca.news.yahoo.com> (a news aggregator with specifically Canadian content). The original CBC news article was published on March 12, 2015 and generated 211 comments and responses from 93 different contributors, with an average of two comments per contributor (7940 words). When republished by Yahoo news on the same date, the separate commenting forum generated 370 comments and replies from 156 readers, 97 (61%) of whom posted only once and 37 (24%) of whom only commented two or three times each (16,468 words).

Online commenting is ubiquitous in our media-saturated society and forums exist across a range of different platform types. While the anonymity of forums poses practical and ethical challenges and the moderation of them raises questions about democratic free speech (see Gibson 2019), it has historically been important for news outlets to not only consider the voice of the public but also to establish a connection with readership (see e.g. Bell 1991). Online commenting provides new challenges and opportunities in this regard, but some research has suggested that reporters do in fact engage with reader commentary, which can lead to agenda setting at news outlets (Santana 2011).

While the anonymity of the comments used in this dataset means that we are not able to interrogate the demographics of who is participating in such debates or why, the anonymity allows readers to disclose private attitudes. As such, online comments provide us insight into the perspectives of readers and the general public, and specifically, allow us to undertake a bottom-up approach to language attitudes (Reyes 2013). We argue that greater attention should be paid to the comments made in anonymous online forums since they allow us insight into some of the attitudes – both socially acceptable and not – that circulate in society.

Method of analysis

This paper employs a critical discourse studies (CDS) approach that is informed by systemic functional linguistics (Eggins 2004; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), in addition to theories of language ideologies and nationalism discussed already. CDS was initially developed to create awareness about the ways discourse is used to create and recreate power relations among social groups including ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities. Awareness of the discursive construction of unequal relations of power is a prerequisite for change and possible subsequent action and struggle towards social justice (Fairclough, 1989). One of the objectives of this study is to provide some awareness about language ideologies and attitudes towards multiculturalism and linguistic diversity in Canada, a country which is internationally believed to be hospitable towards newcomers (Bloemraad 2016). Creating such an awareness is partially possible by making transparent ideologies harbored in discourses about these issues, for example as these attitudes are manifested towards the linguistic landscape of Richmond, BC. This is possible because from a CDS perspective whatever happens socially also happens discursively, and discourse is the most tangible manifestation of ideology (Fairclough 1992, 2001).

Various approaches in CDS have proven to be extremely effective in unpacking discourses that harbor ideologies perpetuating unequal relations of power and discrimination among different ethnic, national and social groups (van Dijk 2017). Previous studies (e.g., Teo 2000; van Dijk 1993) have shown that in-group members are often depicted as actors of positive actions and at the same time as acted-upon (or “patients”) of out-group members’ negative actions. This kind of discursive depiction contributes to the formation of a discourse strategy van Dijk calls “ideological squaring” or “ideological polarization” in which “dominant in-group members tend to emphasize Our good things and Their bad things, and to de-emphasize Our bad things and Their good things” (van Dijk 2008:180). Understanding how Canadians’ attitudes towards the linguistic landscape of Richmond, BC manifest in online comments provides insight into majority-minority relations, where language serves as a proxy for group identity.

Following Fairclough’s (1989, 1992, 1995) approach, we conduct analysis at three levels, as follows: (1) micro, by conducting descriptive analysis of the language in use employing various analytical tools (e.g., transitivity, naming/labelling, presuppositions); (2) meso, by carrying out interpretive and intertextual analysis to tease out issues of text production, dissemination and consumption; and (3) macro, by explaining why the text in question has the identified properties and how its production and consumption are connected to the wider historical and socio-political contexts.

To carry out our micro analysis we employ the transitivity system of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). From an SFL perspective, language is a system of linguistic options that

enables speakers, or online commenters in this case, to choose certain linguistic properties depending on their socio-cultural circumstances, ideologies and attitudes (Eggins 2004). Such analysis proved to be very fruitful in early studies in critical linguistics (Fowler et al. 1979) and also in more recent works in CDA or CDS (Teo 2000; Li 2011; Reyes 2013).

Transitivity analysis focuses on the clause as a unit of analysis by organizing its components into three categories: processes, participants and circumstances. Processes are verbs in traditional grammar, and they can be of several kinds: behavioural, existential, material, mental, relational, and verbal (see Fig. 1 for examples of these processes in context).

Identifying processes can reveal how language users “express experience of the world and of [their] own consciousness” (Bloor and Bloor 2017:155). For our purposes we underline two kinds of participants: actor (i.e. those responsible for carrying out processes, e.g., agent) and the acted-upon (i.e. those affected by processes, e.g., patient). Finally, transitivity analysis involves identifying circumstances consisting of information about the time, place and the manner of the happening. These are materialized not only in adverbial phrases (which often express judgments and evaluations about events, things or persons that are talked about, e.g., slowly, quickly, carefully, haphazardly) but also in prepositional phrases, which have been found important in emphasising or de-emphasizing the agency roles of participants (Richardson 2007: 207). Our aim of transitivity analysis in this paper is to ascertain if different groups of participants (e.g., Chinese Canadians, non-Chinese Richmond residents) are involved in different processes and to determine what roles they have been assigned. Transitivity analysis was undertaken on 42 clauses of the CBC news article, 169 clauses of most-liked CBC comments and 203 clauses of the Yahoo most-liked comments.

Analysis at the meso level consists of intertextual analysis in addition to other aspects of discourse practices including production and consumption. Drawing on Bakhtin (1986), Fairclough (1992: 84) defines intertextuality as “basically the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth.” Traces of other texts, that might be from the past, current or future, can be manifested in quotations, presuppositions, assumptions, or references to specific dates, places, and names (see also Bazerman 2004: 87-89). Intertextual analysis is important in CDA as “an interpretation which locates the text in relation to social repertoires of discourse practices”, namely discourse production and consumption (Fairclough 1992: 61). Moreover, intertextual analysis goes beyond identifying texts that discourse users invoke and focus on how they use those texts, for what ends, and how they position themselves in order to express their own stance (Bazerman 2004: 94).

The micro and meso level analysis can shed light on wider issues relating to social diversity, i.e. the macro level. The following section highlights micro and meso level findings that help to elucidate macro issues relating to Canadian diversity more generally.

	<i>Actor</i>	<i>Process</i>	<i>Acted-upon</i>	<i>Circ.</i>	<i>source</i>
1	City councillor ...	<i>Says</i> (verbal)	[the issue points to ...]		<i>News article</i>
2	Long-time Richmond resident ...	<i>argues</i> (verbal)	[the controversy around COS ...]		<i>News article</i>
3	She	<i>stays away</i> (material)	from businesses with COS		<i>News article</i>
4	A lot of businesses	<i>don't care</i> (mental)	[if they offend or give poor service ...]		CBC comments
5	This (putting up COS)	<i>is</i> (relational)	discrimination		CBC
6	Immigration	<i>is destroying</i> (material)	Canada		CBC
7	Canadians	<i>Feel</i> (mental)	ostracized	in their own	CBC

8	They	continue to <i>throw</i> (material)	it	country, by foreigners in our face	Yahoo
9	The businesses	are <i>hurting</i> (material)	themselves		Yahoo
10	I	<i>think</i> (mental)	[that signs for any business should be written in ...]		Yahoo
11	(you)	watch (behavioural)	[as China succeeds ...]		Yahoo

Figure 1 Examples of process types from the three sets of data.

Findings

A comparison of clause-by-clause analysis of the three data types shows that material processes are more dominant in the comments of both CBC and Yahoo compared to the original CBC news article. Also, the news article consists of more relational and existential processes, on the one hand, and more verbal process, on the other (see Figure 2).

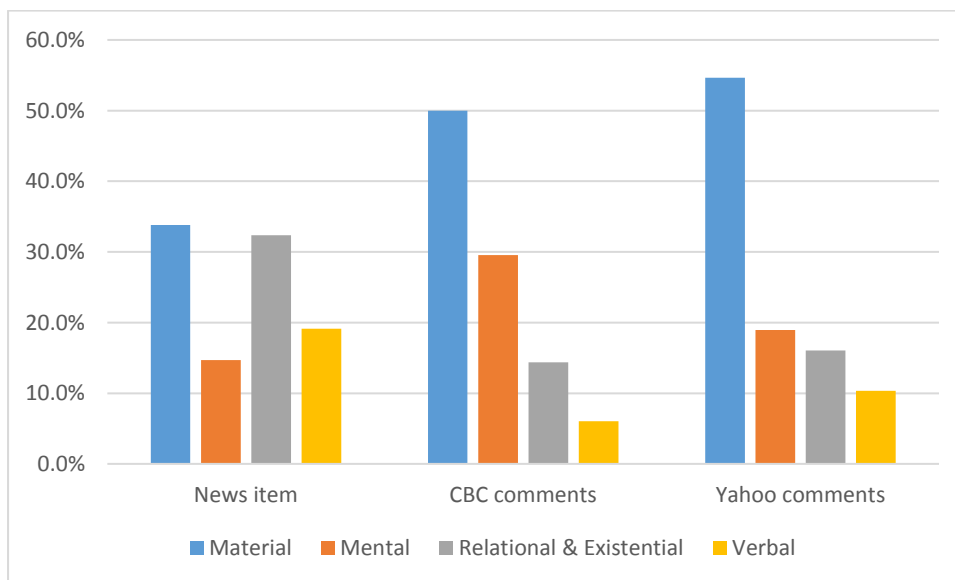


Figure 2 Processes distribution in the three sets of data

Material processes (action verbs) are the most frequent process type across all three datasets. Material processes are sometimes used to represent physical violence – even in contexts that are not ostensibly physically violent, such as in debates over the Spanish language reform (Reyes 2013: 354). In our case, the fact that more material processes are used in the comments than in the news article (e.g., see Fig. 1, items 6, 8, 9) highlights that the comments recontextualise the Richmond signage debate as having real, material underpinnings and, perhaps more importantly, real, material consequence.

The difference in proportions of use of the other process types can be explained by the nature of news discourse as opposed to participation in debates. Relational and existential processes are typical of discourses about identity, or processes of being (Matheson 2005). Such discourses build relations among participants and portray them as all being equally concerned about an issue without appearing to be confrontational. In our data, a high percentage (about 25%) of relational and existential processes are in simple present tense (e.g. *am*, *is*, and *are*). This also makes the article more “present” in the here and now (Dunmire 1997). The article also makes a higher usage of verbal processes like “says” compared to the comments; this can be explained due the fact that news discourse tends to echo various voices involved in a story in order to appear factual, authentic and “objective” (Teo 2000; van Dijk 1993) (also see Fig. 1, items 1, 2). Finally, it is interesting that the comments employ more mental processes compared to the news article: whereas the news article makes a conscious effort to sound unbiased, the comments are manifesting personal opinions and biases. Many commenters do not shy away from stating “I think”, “I feel”, “I find” and so forth (see Fig. 1, items 7, 10) to take the side of either those who think like US or those who are in the THEM camp.

Across the comments, a recurring theme consisted of the juxtaposition of “us” vs. “them”; these categorisations tended to underpin a range of different representations of identities and languages. As will be explained below, while there was some flexibility regarding those who were included in the in-group, the out-group invariably consisted of immigrants and Chinese language speakers in particular.

A close analysis of naming in the data revealed that representations of the out-group relied on labels relating to four main themes: business or finance (e.g. *businesses, business owners, millionaire investors*), ethnicity (e.g. *Asian community, Chinese people, Chinese apartheid*), community size or type (e.g. *mini communities, groups, ghettos, enclaves*), Canadian residency (e.g. *foreigners, immigrants*), or some combination of these categories (e.g. *Asian resident/immigrant, ethnic groups, ethnic ghettos, ethnic enclaves*). An examination of these labels in context showed that 50% of them carried negative connotations.

Unsurprisingly, given the context of the debate, references to *Chinese* businesses, ethnicity, communities and residents were particularly salient in the dataset. Indeed, with 284 occurrences the term *Chinese* is more frequent than words such as *English* (224 occurrences) and *French* (111 occurrences). However, despite the fact that the debate centred on the language of signage, only 61 instances (21%) refer to the Chinese language and well-known varieties of Chinese such as Mandarin and Cantonese are infrequently mentioned (twelve and nine times each, respectively). Instead, the majority of references to *Chinese* refer to Chinese people. This is largely typical of language ideological debates, where attitudes to language are not necessarily about language at all (see Silverstein 1979; Woolard 1998). As Edwards (2011: 61) puts it, individuals’ attitudes towards language varieties reflect “social perceptions

of the speakers of given varieties and have nothing to say about any intrinsic qualities of the varieties themselves”.

Transitivity analysis shows that the vast majority of commenters who do not approve of Chinese-only signage represent immigrants – and specifically Chinese immigrants to Canada – as agents of negative actions (e.g. “destroying Canada”, “overrunning Vancouver”, “prey[ing] on our particular type of socialized society”, “putting quite a strain on Our Country”) or people who are not willing to be agents of positive actions and behaviour (e.g., “learning English”) (Example 1).

Example 1¹

“Many do not bother to learn English, to communicate with the people living in Canada.”

In Example 1 the commenter moves the debate away from the local Richmond context to make it a national concern pertaining to immigration, thereby eliding the nature of official bilingualism in Canada in order to focus only on English and creating a binary between those who speak English (i.e. “people living in Canada”, or Canadians) and those who do not. The erasure of diversity (including the other official language) from this equation allows the commenter to reason that if a person does not speak English, then s/he does not live in Canada.

Another strategy used in the juxtaposition of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ strategy is to portray Chinese Canadians as racist and discriminatory (Examples 2-3).

¹ All comments are provided as originally sourced from the forums. Any errors in the examples are original from the source.

Example 2

“Foreigners who immigrate in droves, create mini-communities, and discriminate against natural citizens, while hiding behind cries of ‘racism’.”

Example 3

“[Chinese immigrants] hide racism under ‘cultural differences.’”

These are examples of what van Dijk (1993: 260, emphasis in original) refers to as the discourse of reverse racism: “[r]eversal or blaming the victim is another prominent move in the overall strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation”. Frequently, commenters focus specifically on business owners (sometimes overgeneralized to all Chinese-Canadians or even all new immigrants) who are represented as discriminatory in their commercial practices. It is argued that COS express indifference (Example 4) or even antagonism (Example 5) towards non-Chinese customers.

Example 4

“They obviously don’t need my business.”

Example 5

“One option is for these businesses to completely ignore those for whom they obviously have disdain, or outright hatred.”

Here, commenters imply that business is only valued if the owner can offer services in the language of the customer (i.e. English), otherwise English-speaking customers have the option of choosing to shop elsewhere. The luxury of choice is not remarked upon; commenters instead focus on the lack of complete freedom of choice and, crucially, the devalued role of the English-speaking customer in the Richmond marketplace.

In response to perceived discrimination, in many cases commenters call for action using modal verbs. Eggins (2004) explains: “Modalization is the expression of the speaker’s

attitude towards what s/he's saying. It is the way the speaker gets into the text: expressing a judgment about the certainty, likelihood, or frequency of something happening or being. Modalization is always expressing the implicit judgment of the speaker" (180). In the comments, modality is used to call not only for the use of Canadian official languages, but also for integration, deportation and repatriation (Examples 6-9).

Example 6

"Either English or French must be used as well as any third language."

Example 7

"They [immigrants] must integrate into the mainstream period."

Example 8

"Illegal immigrants should be deported."

Example 9

"They [Chinese immigrants] should go back to China."

Both modal words (should, must) are modals of obligation and necessity (Eggins 2004: 179); however, "must" enjoys a much higher degree of obligation and necessity compared to "should". When the commenters make demands about the use of official languages, the modal "must" is employed: commenters express no doubt that their stance on the use of official languages is justified. However, when it comes to suggestions about deporting immigrants, commenters resort to the modal "should", which indicates that they are not completely sure of the grounds for deportation. Modals are also used to provide advice for non-Chinese British Columbians: they are not required to submit to what immigrants prefer ("People here *don't have to* assimilate to immigrants' wants") but instead they should regulate language use ("We *need* a sign language law").

Many comments expressing negative attitudes towards COS invoke negative stereotypes about people of Chinese origin or who happen to speak Chinese; other commenters avoid discussing the signs at all and instead focus exclusively on Chinese people (Example 10).

Example 10

“Ever walk around downtown Vancouver recently? Notice the senior citizens ... the beggars, the homeless, the street kids committing car break-ins, are almost exclusively white or first nations. Immigration is destroying Canada.”

Comments of this kind, which blame immigrants for social ills, reinforce the discourse of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’, and suggest that immigrants do not face any problems such as homelessness, despite findings to the contrary (Fiedler, Schuurman and Hyndman 2006).

Negative representations of Chinese immigrants tend to rely on two assumptions: China is a bad country and Chinese immigrants do not assimilate. For example, Example 11 expresses concern over the admission of Chinese immigrants into Canada.

Example 11

“Mainland China has a number of problems that are indicative of the values of its people. Environmental disasters...corruption of officials... I find it very concerning that the very people with those values are being welcomed into this country with open arms...”

A presupposition here is that the cultural and socio-political environments of countries of origin determine immigrants’ values and behaviour in Canada. Thus, if mainland China is “corrupt” then it follows that all people with Chinese background are corrupt and they are

corrupting Canada, too. Part of this reasoning relates to the concern that immigrants are not integrating into Canadian society (Example 12).

Example 12

“50 years ago when Italians and Portuguese immigrated here, you didn’t see business owners put up signs in their language only. They assimilated to Canadian culture.

What happened to that?”

This reminds us of the discursive construct van Dijk (2017: 39) calls “good immigrants” vs. “bad immigrants”, with the presupposition being that “good immigrants” assimilate into the dominant language and culture and forget about their own. Indeed, many commenters argue that the use of non-official languages in isolation from the use of official languages will create “ethnic enclaves” and “ghettos” (Examples 13-14).

Example 13

“We MUST stop ethnic enclaves from occurring.”

Example 14

“Canada cities slowly become divided by ethnic ghettos”

Thus, the examples show the ways in which an out-group, defined in part by language but mainly by ethnicity and – crucially – steeped in stereotypes, is being pitted against a victimised ‘us’. These negative attitudes towards immigrants should not come as a surprise when “the prevailing attitude towards diversity in English Canada during the first part of [the last century] was that ethnic groups should give up their own languages and cultures and become assimilated to the dominant British group” (Cummins and Danesi 1992: 10). Also, a 2016 study showed that 68% of Canadians held assimilationist attitudes towards immigrants (Kurl 2016).

In contrast to the labels used to describe ‘them’ in the data (see above), the most frequent labels used for “us” are neutral or positive. Language is the primary way in which the in-group is indexed, with *English* associated with “us”. Notably, whereas only 21% of instances of *Chinese* refer to language, more than 80% of the 224 instances of *English* refer to language. In other words, *Chinese* tends to be used to discuss people, with ethnicity being an important subtext in many cases, whereas *English* allows the in-group to self-represent in neutral terms with relation to language (e.g. *English-speaking*). Other labels for the in-group relate to the nation (e.g. *Canadians*) and sometimes simply not being ‘them’ (e.g. *non-Chinese*). Still other some labels reveal the real basis on which in-group identity is formed, such as ethnicity (e.g. *white folks*), heritage (e.g. *Euro-centric*), and natural provenance (e.g. *natural citizens*). These labels tend to fit the hegemonic discourse of a common Canadian identity (i.e. English and French) and help to reconstitute both commonsensical notions of “Canadianness” as well as discourses of “otherness”.

Another theme in the data is Canadian bilingualism, which tends to be used to justify the exclusion of Chinese. Bilingualism is invoked as a core identity marker for many of the commenters; English and French are argued to be part of what it means to be Canadian and they are represented as a “traditional value” together with heritage, culture, customs, traditions, and way of life. A recurring assumption is that being Canadian means to learn and use the two official languages of Canada, i.e. English and French (Examples 15-17).

Example 15

“The official languages of Canada are English and French ... Richmond or anywhere else in Canada—get rid of these signs.”

Example 16

“The last time I looked English and French were the official languages not CHINESE.”

Example 17

“This is Canada! There are two, I repeat two official languages...French and English. Not Chinese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Farci or any other. All signage for business and street signs should be in one of the official languages.”

Intertextual analysis also highlighted that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which affirms the role of English and French as the official languages of Canada, is also repeatedly referenced in the comments (Example 18).

Example 18

“The charter of rights and freedoms states: Official Languages of Canada: 1.English and French are the official languages of Canada.”

Despite the symbolic role of French alongside English in these examples, its role in the data is rather peripheral. While there were 284 references to *Chinese* and 224 references to *English*, there are only 111 references to *French*, nearly half of which occur alongside *English* (52 instances or 47%). When French is discussed apart from English, it is often so that arguments can be made for residents of Richmond to implement language laws and practices similar to those in effect in Quebec. Commenters argue that English in Richmond should be treated as French in Quebec; for signage, this relates to not only the visibility but also the prominence of the protected language (in this case, English) (see Landry and Bourhis 1997). Here, the commenters draw on ideologies of language endangerment, an unusual reversal since English is so often the language seen to be encroaching on “smaller” language varieties (see Duchêne and Heller 2007). The argument is that COS (and signs where English is not predominant) should be removed and/or owners should be fined (Examples 19-20).

Example 19

“The French are worried about the loss of their language, English speaking people in Vancouver should also be worried about losing theirs.”

Example 20

“...If the Chinese people of Richmond cannot accept this, then maybe we English speaking people should install a language police service similar to the Province of Quebec in order to protect our rights, our language, our customs and heritage”

The references to Quebec’s language policy are notable, given that Western Canadians have historically been resistant to official language policy (Section 2). Therefore, although French might be invoked as equivalent to English in some comments, these invocations may be disingenuous, given the rejection of French in other Western Canadian contexts (see AUTHOR 2016). Thus, it seems that bilingualism is mentioned primarily with reference to ‘our’ (in-group) Canadian identity, which is in some examples represented as fixed and homogeneous but in need of protection (Example 21).

Example 21

“It comes to protecting our rights, our customs and our language.”

It is perhaps this view of Canada as stable and static which makes it vulnerable to influences from “others”, which are seen as a threat to Canadian identity.

Although we have thus far focused on the comments’ polarisation of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ (which has invariably involved anti-Chinese sentiment), there were counter examples in the data. For example, several commenters engage in intertextual arguments, contesting the interpretations of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that were being used to justify English/French bilingualism to the exclusion of Chinese. In a similar vein, other commenters reject the

premise that English and French are the national languages of the country and argue that “this land [Canada] was stolen from native peoples” (Example 23).

Example 22

I find it strange how we took over Canada and made the natives speak English and now WE are complaining about someone doing the same to us! This is a non issue people. If you don't like it then learn how to speak some of the native languages.

Despite advocating native rights, this user still employs “we” to refer to English-speaking Canadians, thus maintaining the “us” vs. “them” dichotomy discussed earlier. Indeed, this dichotomy highlights that Chinese Canadians are not only “othered” in the discourse, they also rarely participate in the debate at all. Only three commenters explicitly self-identify as being “Chinese Canadian” and the label “Chinese Canadian” is rejected by other commenters, who argue that “There's not [sic] such thing as a Chinese-Canadian” and “either you are Canadian or Chinese”. Here, the dismissal of Chinese Canadian identity is used to undermine the legitimacy of the very people at the heart of the debate.

Discussion

Findings from the Richmond signage debate have shown that representations of languages are intertwined with stereotypes pertaining to ethnicity and culture, which are represented as a threat to an imagined Canadian identity and way of life. Such a finding corroborates previous research, which has found that English-speaking Canadians are particularly susceptible to linguistic and cultural insecurity that leads to negative intergroup attitudes (Medeiros 2019). Although some commenters draw on official linguistic duality in order to justify this attitude, privileging French alongside English, others ignore official linguistic duality in favour of an exclusive focus on English, in many cases suggesting that Canada is seen as a monolingual country. In all cases, commenters refer to monolithic language categories (e.g. Chinese,

English, French) and diversity within these categories tends to be overlooked: varieties of Chinese are rarely mentioned (although this may be due to the difficulty in distinguishing them in writing) and nothing is said of the different varieties of English and French spoken across the country.

Unlike Chinese, English is discussed in exclusively linguistic (i.e. rather than ethnic or national) terms, suggesting that it is a neutral language for all to use. Notably, some commenters seem taken aback that English was not the default language of the marketplace, indicating that it is presupposed to be not only the most neutral language (i.e. for business), but also perhaps the most useful. Commenters may be uncomfortable with COS because they represent the reality that English is not the only language of the market. The fact that English is represented as both one of the official languages of Canada *and* the language of the market demonstrates the complex interaction of language ideologies with national ideologies in globalized contexts, where national “pride” sometimes conflicts with opportunities for material profit (Heller and Duchêne 2012). Although language seems to be tied to nationhood and belonging, the usefulness and ostensible neutrality of English is used to buttress arguments for its role in national and local contexts. Thus, languages prove to be a means of both inclusion and exclusion, depending on context, and also a mechanism of power; comments suggest that access to rights and privileges depends on the language(s) spoken, with the primacy of English (and sometimes French) excluding monolingual market freedom in other languages.

The anonymity of online forums allows commenters to provide frank attitudes towards linguistic landscapes without fear of repercussions; the open opportunity to participate in such forums also allows researchers to access a potentially diverse range of attitudes. The

potential drawback of full discretion is that commenters may advocate provocative stances that are more extreme than might otherwise be shared; such comments could polarise attitudes towards linguistic landscapes rather than representing the spectrum of opinions that exist in society more generally. Even if that is the case, the fact remains that all comments, especially those that are liked or have received replies from readers, can potentially contribute to the normalization of such attitudes if they are adopted by news outlets (cf. Santana 2013). Thus, online comments can serve as a useful way of accessing not only the social dimension of linguistic landscapes, but also the nature of the wider context in which the linguistic landscape is situated.

Indeed, the value of data from the commenting forum is twofold. On the one hand, the open nature of the forum allows for participation from the *inhabitants* of Richmond (Trumper-Hecht 2010); data from the forum allows us to consider the comments as attitudes which may have grown incrementally as a result of long-standing exposure to the signage. On the other hand, the forum also allows for participation from other individuals who have perhaps never even been to Richmond or seen Chinese signs (“overhearers”, c.f. Angermeyer 2017, after Goffman). In this case, attitudes towards the signage are perhaps related to the “imagined” linguistic landscape (Mitchell 2010) but the language ideologies are no less real. Thus online comments offer different angles on the study of linguistic landscapes.

Here, access to both inhabitants’ and overhearers’ attitudes has provided greater insight into the Canadian linguistic-political context. As noted above, neither bilingualism nor multiculturalism policies have been uniformly popular amongst the general Canadian population (Kymlicka 2004), and the commenters’ privileging of English over French and largely homogeneous representation of the country suggests that this remains true. The plea

for immigrants to assimilate is counter to the core tenets of Canadian multiculturalism and bilingualism, which is particularly problematic because the Canadian population is diversifying at an increasing rate (Statistics Canada 2016). Although the policies of pan-Canadian national identity allow diverse cultures to share a common identity and two common languages (Taylor 1993), diversity, at least according to the data in this study, seems to be devalued and perceived as a threat to English Canadian identity in particular (a finding corroborated by Medeiros 2019). The vociferous nature of the debate suggests that Canada is in need of proactive policies that promote diversity of language and culture and, at the same time, take into account the opinions of the Canadians of all backgrounds (cf. Haque 2012). In the absence of sound and proactive policy, debates over language can lead to not only negative but also xenophobic and even racist attitudes towards “non-official” languages and their speakers. The rise of the far-right suggests the urgency of this endeavour.

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