

Coloniality in the Japanese university linguistic landscape

The modernity/coloniality/decoloniality project describes coloniality as the dark side of modernity. The two are inseparable, as there would be no modernity without coloniality. Modernity/coloniality has roots in the conquest and subordination of much of the world under Western colonialism, though colonialism under a European empire is not required for an experience of coloniality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Coloniality is maintained through a colonial matrix of power that has four vertices: the coloniality of power seeks control of production and distribution and promotes poverty along racial grounds; the coloniality of knowledge denies the legitimacy of non-Western epistemologies; the coloniality of being destroys self-esteem and makes the colonized individual view subjugation as natural; and the coloniality of language defines what constitutes language and who has the legitimacy to speak, and exercises control through the power of language (Torquato, 2020). This matrix acts to make invisible other ways of knowing or being in the world beyond those of Western modernity. To decolonize is to accept that Western ways of knowing and being are but one option among many, and to ‘delink’ from Western ways of categorizing the world by ‘border thinking’, or thinking beyond the edges of Western thought (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

As physical displays of language use and policy, linguistic landscapes can be investigated for evidence of coloniality/decoloniality. Linguistic landscapes are the written text that is visible in public spaces and aimed at multiple unspecified readers (Backhaus, 2019). Within public space, it is people who create, maintain, contest, and negotiate the use of language (Shohamy, 2018). Studies of the linguistic landscape are therefore studies of how space is used, who it is used by, and to what ends (Blommaert, 2013). ‘Schoolscapes’ are the linguistic landscapes of educational establishments (Troyer, 2023). Dominant beliefs about the world are reproduced and communicated

through education by both the explicit curriculum of class content and the hidden curriculum, or implicitly communicated norms and values (Apple, 1971). The hidden curriculum of language values, including what a language is and how languages are related in terms of power, is reflected in the schoolscape (Laihonen & Szabó, 2016). This curriculum is not always accepted but contradicted and subverted as, like other linguistic landscapes, schoolscape are contested spaces where multiple actors vie for control of some or all the space (Troyer, 2023). Linguistic landscape research using the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality framework appears to be limited (Correa & Gueurrero, 2024), though there are studies of Japanese linguistic landscapes that focus on the impact of colonialism on language choice and mix (e.g. Santalahti, 2025) and language hierarchy and erasure (e.g. Heinrich, 2016).

The site of this study was the ‘International Learning Centre’ (ILC) of a private university in Japan. The building functions mainly as the foreign language department of the university and is where students take four semesters of compulsory English study. As a language department, the building can be considered as having the legitimacy to shape beliefs about language, and therefore this study had two main research questions: How does the schoolscape of the university reflect coloniality? And how is coloniality subverted through the schoolscape?

The coloniality of language

Coloniality and language have a dialectical relationship as coloniality both shapes language and is reproduced through it. Two interlinked elements of the coloniality of language are the myth of the monolingual nation (Gurney & Demuro, 2022) and the myth of colonial languages as universal and ‘naturally’ superior or dominant (Veronelli, 2015). Following Pennycook (2006), the term ‘myth’ is drawn from Barthes

(1957/2012), who describes myths as hiding the historical quality of things, making the intended seem natural and contingency seem eternal.

The myth of monolingualism

In 2020, Japanese Deputy Prime Minister Aso drew a connection between race and monolingualism by stating, “no other country but [Japan] has lasted for as long as 2,000 years with one language, one ethnic group, and one dynasty” (Yamaguchi, 2020). This myth of monolingualism – ‘one nation, one language’ – is a European ideology that describes the nation as the most natural social and political form, and the national language as a homogenous entity that binds the nation together (Westphal, 2021).

Acceptance of the myth of monolingualism requires acceptance of three propositions: that languages can be separated into distinct named entities; that languages are governed by stable rules regarding ‘correct’ usage, so non-standard language use is illegitimate; and that languages are intrinsically linked to place- and race-based identities (Gurney & Demuro, 2022). However, divisions between languages are not natural phenomena but social inventions. The invention of a language necessitates the drawing of boundaries between what is and what is not accepted as (a) language, or between those ‘with’ language and those without (Pennycook, 2006). Those who did not speak either the colonizers’ language or a language as defined by the colonizer were deemed less intelligent and therefore of a lower type of human, and thus the invention of languages was part of a process of dehumanization of colonized peoples (Veronelli, 2015).

The myth of monolingualism was part of the ‘scientific’ worldview that entered Japan during the Meiji period, and the establishment of a Japanese language went alongside the establishment of both a Japanese nation-state and a Japanese empire, in conscious emulation of European languages, nations, and empires (Ueda, 2021). As

standard Japanese was established in schools, the use of non-standard dialects was punished (Gottlieb, 2007), and there were conscious efforts in some colonies to replace local languages with Japanese (Heinrich, 2012; Ueda, 2021). A study of the linguistic landscapes of three Okinawan sites shows how even in the twenty-first century, Ryukyuan languages are erased from the landscape despite their widespread daily use, reflecting an ideology of a monolingual Japan (Heinrich, 2016).

One aspect of the myth of monolingualism is the idea that those not of a nation cannot fully grasp the complexities and nuances of its language. However, what constitutes ‘proper’ language use, and therefore what distinguishes ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ speakers, is social positioning of race and nationality and not language proficiency. It is not language use that marks a speaker as a native-speaker but social position that marks language use as that of a native-speaker. As such, there is no possibility of an individual moving from the category of ‘non-native’ to ‘native’. In this way, the ‘native-speaker’ is held as ‘naturally’ superior to the ‘non-native’, and the race-based self/other boundary necessary for the colonialities of power of power and being is enforced between the two (Tupas, 2022). Belief in the link between language and race or nationality and its reproduction through education is well attested to in Japan (e.g. Okubo, 2009).

The myth of monolingualism supports coloniality by conflating language and race, thereby enforcing the division of humanity along racial lines. In turn, coloniality enforces the myth of monolingualism through the erasure of other languages and linguistic homogenization along national lines.

The myth of hierarchy

A second feature of the coloniality of language is hierarchies of language that are co-

constructed with colonial hierarchies of race (Rosa & Flores, 2017; Veronelli, 2015). These hierarchies of language place European languages such as English at the top because colonial languages are universal, while other languages can only be the language of folklore and local culture (Torquato, 2020). The language practices of the colonized are considered unfit for legitimate participation in the modern/colonial world (Rosa & Flores, 2017). This hierarchy can also be seen in attitudes to written text: languages that use an alphabet are placed at the top, and those without a written form at the bottom (Liu, 2015). The hierarchy of languages is reflected in the Japanese linguistic landscape, where Japanese and English overwhelmingly dominate (Backhaus, 2019; Saito, 2009).

Neoliberal language ideologies reproduce colonial hierarchies of language by attaching prestige to colonial languages as the ‘naturally’ most important, cutting them loose from cultural and social dimensions and the historical reasons for their widespread use, and transforming them into ‘neutral’ skills necessary for the economic advancement of the individual (Bori & Canale, 2022; Park, 2022). The need for English is taken for granted because English is viewed as a universally useful language that can connect speakers from different linguistic backgrounds and that provides economic benefits for individuals, institutions, and businesses (Kubota & Okuda, 2016). For the individual, neoliberal discourses present language proficiency as a way to transcend one’s colonial defined category, and the ‘native speaker’ is not only the standard by which all speakers are judged but also a goal to be worked towards (Kubota, 2011b; Park, 2022). However, since the goal of ‘native’ English is unachievable, language acts to exclude ‘non-native speakers’ or racialized colonial subjects, from power (Pennycook, 2006). In Japanese linguistic landscapes, neoliberal discourses are reflected through the common association of English with prestige, modernity, and

commerce (Backhaus, 2019; Rowland, 2016), and English is promoted as a tool for self-actualization (Nuske, 2019). However, English is also seen as a threat to Japaneseness (Yamagami and Tollefson, 2011). Japanese educational policy regarding English has been used not only to promote neoliberal ideology and the idea of English as universal, but to strengthen a hegemonic ideal of what it means to be Japanese (Hashimoto, 2000; Ha, 2013).

While there is little need for English for many people in Japan, it is still used to exclude people from power. Despite being part of the national curriculum, opportunities for developing English competence are a privilege afforded mainly to higher-earning Japanese families (Smith, 2022). Exams such as TOEIC are used to screen for employment and promotion, and some proficiency in English is required for acceptance to university (Kubota, 2011a, 2011b). As a result, English acts as a mechanism for ‘privilege reinforcement’ (Smith, 2022), ranking people according to their proximity to an unattainable ‘native-speaking’ ideal.

The myth of language hierarchies supports coloniality by enforcing and making ‘natural’ racial hierarchies, thereby justifying the exploitation of ‘inferior’ peoples and the erasure of non-Western ways of understanding and explaining the world.

Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the ‘International Learning Centre’ (ILC) of a private university in Japan. The building has four floors, featuring seven classrooms, eight study rooms, an open plan café/seating area, event hall, and self-access centre (SAC) containing a library and audio-visual equipment. Floors are connected by stairs and an elevator. The upper floors are used predominantly for

English classes or private study. The ground floor is used for classes, recreation and study in the café area, and various PR events.

Quantitative data

To gather quantitative data, the researcher visited the public areas of the building six times during the 2023 academic year and photographed the written text, using Savela's (2018) semiotic definition of a text that allows multiple texts to be contained within the same frame (Figure 1), or one text to traverse multiple frames (Figure 2). Photography is a common form of data collection in linguistic landscape studies (Gorter, 2018).

Visits were at least four weeks apart, and all visits took place while classes were in session. Linguistic landscapes are dynamic and contain many temporary texts, so multiple visits to a site can help account for changes in the landscape (Brown, 2018; Pavlenko, 2015).

Taking the principal that any text should be visible by any visitor to the building, texts in the washrooms, classroom interiors, and offices were excluded. Texts from the stairwell were included because they were visible to all users, despite the stairs themselves being inaccessible to people with mobility issues. Texts outside but visible from the building were excluded.

Some text types found inside the building were excluded for privacy concerns. Texts such as book covers in the library were excluded on the grounds that the addition of such data would be overwhelming. Table 1 shows the text types that were included and excluded from the data.

In total, 3683 texts were recorded. The number of texts recorded each month alongside some events reflected in the schoolscape can be seen in Table 2.

Codes were developed inductively for language, language mix, function, author, and content. The final list of categories, codes, and frequencies can be seen in Table 3.

Coding decisions for language were based on script (Seargeant, 2013) and vocabulary. They were not exclusive. Texts with kanji and/or kana were coded as Japanese. Abbreviations such as ‘DVD’ were coded as Japanese when surrounded by Japanese text (Inoue, 2005). Texts in simplified hanzi were coded as Chinese and texts in hangul were coded as Korean. Coding decisions for languages written in roman script were made according to vocabulary.

Language mix codes were also not exclusive. Texts that featured the same information in multiple languages were coded as ‘translation’. The code ‘header/body’ was used where the text had headings in one language and body text in another. Texts that had different information in different languages were coded as ‘different information’. Codes that combined languages within continuous sections of text, barring the exceptions described above, were coded as ‘translanguage’. Figure 3 illustrates the use of these codes.

Codes for function were adapted from Troyer (2023). As texts are in interaction with the geographical context in which they sit, emplacement was a consideration in this category (Blommaert, 2013). For example, some signs displayed schedules for one-to-one study skills sessions that could be reserved at the counter in the SAC. In the café these were coded as having an advertising function. At the counter in the SAC they were coded as having an informative function, as students could refer to them when booking a session.

The codes for authorship were the most problematic as it transpired that texts were often vetted before going on display, complicating the idea of a single author or

group of authors. Where texts were produced externally there were questions over whether the producer or the person who brought the text into the landscape should be credited. Furthermore, the same person could create texts in different capacities, such as a hypothetical student who not only displays their classwork but also creates posters for a student club. Due to these complexities only texts with an indication of authorship from within the university were coded. As such, data were significantly fewer for this category.

The final coding category was for ‘content’. These codes were drawn from the two myths of the coloniality of language. Texts that portrayed English as a universal language were coded as ‘universal English’; texts related to assessments were coded as ‘exams’; texts connected to cultural events were coded as ‘festival’; texts showing people explicitly portrayed as from Japan (for example, by placing them next to images of Japanese flags) but using a language other than Japanese were coded as ‘language skills 1’; and codes that showed people explicitly portrayed as non-Japanese but using Japanese were coded as ‘language skills 2’.

Qualitative data

Qualitative data was collected through three tours given by ‘LL-actors’, individuals who had some responsibility for the texts visible around the building (Troyer, 2023). In this ‘tourist guide technique’ (Szabó & Troyer, 2017) participants took on the role of a guide steering the researcher around the site and introducing elements of the landscape that they considered important

These actors were selected after an initial analysis of the quantitative data. Edward and Elizabeth were approached directly, while Mary responded to an appeal to the student SAC staff. The SAC were responsible for two thirds of the attributable

signs, and during their tours both Mary and Elizabeth took responsibility for many further signs that did not have clear attribution. SAC staff (though neither Elizabeth nor Mary) also had responsibility for vetting signs that were produced outside the ILC. Between them, these three LL-actors appeared to have had some role to play in many of the signs visible in the landscape. Table 4 shows a pseudonym for each participant, their roles in creating the schoolscape, and some self-reported demographic data.

Positionality and power

The author of this paper – White, British, male, and anglophone – is employed as a lecturer in the ILC. The prior and continuing working relationship between the author, Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth raises several issues of power in terms of the research relationship. As head of the department, Edward has some professional authority over the author. In contrast, the author could be considered as holding a more senior professional role than Elizabeth. Though Mary is not and never has been a student of the author, the role of lecturer is more powerful than the role of student.

In all research interviews, power lies with the interviewer, regardless of other connections between the interviewer and interviewee (Kvale, 2007). However, the tour guide technique helped return some power to the interviewees as it allowed them to choose the speed, duration, content, and physical route of their interview.

Ethical considerations

The quantitative data consisted of photographs of texts displayed in public, and so no consent was necessary to collect data. Written permission to reproduce the images featured in the figures was obtained from Edward in his role as head of the department, and from the student authors of the texts in Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7 as copyright holders. The LL-actors who played the role of tour guide gave informed consent to their

participation and were given a chance to respond to a copy of this paper before submission. Ethical permission for the study was granted by the departmental ethics committee where the study was carried out.

Findings

Findings are drawn from the quantitative and qualitative data. Throughout the findings and discussion section, these data are supported with reference to the texts themselves.

The first coding category was for language. The language combinations and their frequencies are shown by month in Table 5. The landscape was dominated by English, followed by Japanese. Chinese and Korean were only visible on the reverse side of a commercially produced sign attached to a hand-sanitizer dispenser and Latin was visible on some labels giving information about potted plants. On some visits these texts were obscured or absent.

The decision to establish an English-dominated schoolscape was made according to beliefs about pedagogy. Speaking about the ILC's founding, Edward explained why English dominated the landscape:

When they were first sort of selling this concept, in a way, they were like this is going to be like an English immersion sort of experience. Which I think is not realistic and was never realistic, but I think that's how they sold it. I mean, it's kind of, I think, often the Japanese people, particularly older people, have this idea that that's what is needed. And somehow you create this English-only-environment logic. People would just suddenly start speaking.

Both Japanese and English were represented by very standardised forms. None of the Japanese text featured dialect words or phrases, and with few exceptions the English was written in 'standard' American English. In some student produced texts there were potential examples of Japanese-English such as the use of 'there + quantifiers' shown in Figure 4 (Miyake & Tsushima, 2012) and of 'unagi' sentences that follow the structure

of topic + comment, such as in Figure 5 (Fujiwara et. al., 2024). There were also posters created by Mary “to introduce the home countries of teachers,” one of which featured vocabulary local to two teachers’ childhood homes (Figure 6).

Table 6 shows the functions and the frequency of each language or mix with which they were associated. The most common function was ‘to label’, and most of these texts were made up of a single word. The majority of these labels, wayfaring signs, and decorative texts were in English. Edward explained this was due to the initial desire for a pseudo-immersive language environment. He described the pressure to focus on English immersion from the university management as “pretty strong” and highlighted that this helped sell the university to prospective students and their parents. Edward also showed that though there had been a move away from an immersion policy, remnants existed in the landscape, such as a carpet printed with the words “English Please” at the entrance to the SAC.

Texts coded as ‘to advertise’ were mainly produced on campus and included signs about ILC facilities and university events. This category also included externally-produced posters advertising proficiency exams. Some of these were prominently placed between the stairwell and elevator, meaning that any visitor to the upper floors needed to pass them.

Table 7 shows the number of texts and the frequency of languages and mixes by author. There were clear differences in language choice between authors. Texts produced by the university were usually only in Japanese. In contrast, texts created by students, student groups, and the staff of the ILC showed a much wider use of linguistic resources, with much greater mixing between languages.

The three guides described how they decided which languages to use in their texts. In one ground-floor stop on her tour, Elizabeth said she wanted to use English

only but felt that students would not understand or engage with the texts unless there was some Japanese as well. Later, in front of a sign in the upper floors of the building, she said the language on the sign was extremely simple and therefore she felt confident students would understand if she used only English.

Edward reported he had little control over language choice. He talked about the time he spent looking for suitable inspirational English language quotations from famous Japanese people to decorate the walls of the SAC, before settling on one from Murakami Haruki. He said it was important to have a quotation from a Japanese person as it was “relatable”, but displaying one in Japanese would not have been possible so he had not considered it.

Three stops on Mary’s tour showed the decisions she made regarding language choice (Figure 7). At a text written in her capacity as a member of staff she said, “Some are international students so I wrote in Japanese and English so everyone can read it. And I thought some people might not know how to speak at the counter, so I wrote this in English [pointing to the top right-hand corner].” In contrast, she explained she had used Japanese in a self-introduction on the wall of the SAC: “I wanted to write in English, but I put it in Japanese so people would read it.” Finally, she explained why she had inserted the English word ‘try’ into an otherwise Japanese text by saying it “was the best word.”

Mary was not the only student to utilize translanguaging strategies. Celebrations for three festivals were rare opportunities for students to influence the schoolscape. They could do this by adding a *tanzaku* to a tree in the café area at Tanabata, designing and describing a Halloween monster, and writing a letter to Santa at Christmas. Students created translanguaged and bilingual texts, such as one student who wrote, “I want 単位 [academic credit].”

The content codes showed that there were many texts with Japanese people speaking in English, though none showing Japanese people speaking in any other language. Only one group of texts portrayed a non-Japanese person as a Japanese speaker: posters advertising learning support services showed the faces and names of three advisors alongside flags denoting their nationality (two Japanese, one U.S.A.) and the statement that Japanese was acceptable in these sessions. There were no indications of non-Japanese people speaking any other language. However, only a small number of texts positioned English as a universal language, one of which can be seen in Figure 5.

Discussion

As a contested space, the colonality of language was both supported and subverted through the schoolscape of the ILC. The most notable elements were a self/other binary of monolingual Japanese people and English-speaking foreign people; the valorisation of the ‘native speaker’ and related pedagogies; and texts that reinforced boundaries between languages, in contrast with those that crossed borders.

The self/other binary

As in other Japanese universities (Wang, 2015; Yokota, 2015), very few languages were found in the schoolscape of the ILC. This led to perhaps the clearest indication of colonality in the ILC landscape; the split between a homogenized local Japanese identity and a homogenized universal foreign identity, where one was represented by Japanese monolingualism and the other by American-English monolingualism. Through this split the hidden curriculum of the landscape reproduced the colonial myths of monolingualism and language hierarchies.

The schoolscape maintained the forgery of a linguistically homogenous nation

by rendering other Japanese languages invisible. Although Edward reported that the university preferred an English-only policy for the ILC, texts produced by the university administration or other departments were almost always only in Japanese. No regional variations of Japanese were visible. While there were texts that showed or described Japanese people using English, perhaps this should be expected from a language department. No Japanese person was shown speaking a language other than Japanese or English, making other languages spoken by Japanese people, such as Portuguese or Ryukyuan languages, invisible.

The foreign side of the binary was also homogenised. The front and back entrances of the building had double automatic doors, where the name “International Learning Centre” was writ large. However, in the schoolscape the ‘International’ element was represented solely by English. Not only were majority Anglophone countries featured most prominently in posters on the walls, but none of these posters included mention of other languages spoken in those countries. Texts with mention of non-Anglophone majority countries also hid any form of linguistic diversity, such as a poster recruiting students for a study-abroad program in Thailand that gave ‘improved English communication skills’ as a possible benefit of joining the program. There were only a small number of texts indicating that non-Japanese people might be able to speak Japanese, and in fact these texts only featured one repeated image of a specific lecturer. Furthermore, the English in the texts around the ILC did not reflect the multiple forms of English spoken around the world. Barring the examples in Figure 6, which were explicitly presented as ‘non-standard’, all the English texts described by Edward as “checked by a native speaker” were written with North American conventions of spelling, word choice and grammar. These texts acted to homogenise ‘foreignness’ as Anglophone and monolingual.

Analysis of the ‘Festival’ code further demonstrated how non-Anglophone possibilities were erased from the idea of ‘international’. Firstly, calendars posted throughout the building only marked Halloween, Christmas, and a New Year on December 31/January 1. Secondly, three festivals were celebrated in the building: Tanabata, Halloween, and Christmas. Not only were festivals from other traditions ignored, but the way these celebrations were constructed were specific to American or Japanese traditions. For example, the assemblage of Christmas iconography – trees, wrapped gifts, letters to Santa, decorations with English greetings – and its establishment in the schoolscape in December connoted a secular American celebration (Marling, 2000) rather than a Coptic or Orthodox one. Through such events, the schoolscape maintained the colonial condition by making invisible other ways of being not-Japanese, beyond Anglophone and North American.

This binary was emphasized by the use of space within the building. Most of the Japanese-only texts were found on the ground floor, which represented a liminal space between the Japanese-language university around it and the English-language ILC above it. The widest variety of language mixes were found here, featuring monolingual texts in Japanese and English and all forms of multilingual signage. However, on the upper floors monolingual Japanese texts were limited to those produced outside the university, such as safety certificates. The vast quantity of English-only texts or multilingual texts set against the low number of Japanese-only texts limited the validity of Japanese in the more ‘international’ context of the higher floors and emphasized the colonial hierarchy of universal English over local Japanese.

The ‘native-speaker’ and related pedagogies

Edward described the necessity of having a ‘native-speaker’ check the accuracy of many of the English texts to avoid embarrassment when proficient English users visited

the space, while also saying that he did not expect Japanese visitors to engage deeply with it. The ‘native (English) speaker’ was considered to be the arbiter of correct English, and there was an assumption that Japanese visitors to the site could not or would not read the English text.

The English in decorative texts, wayfaring signs, and labels were remnants from an early desire for an English-only ‘immersive’ learning experience. The concept of immersive language learning is strongly linked to the idea of the elevated native-speaker and the ‘superior’ West. Foreign language teaching in Japan has a history of importing Western teaching methods, implying that Japanese pedagogical practices are somehow deficient (Noda & O'Regan, 2020). Such methods “promote the native speaker's presumed language competence, learning styles, communication patterns, conversational maxims, cultural beliefs, and even accent as the norm” (Kumaravadivelu, 2016). The ‘English-only’ environment of the upper floors of the ILC maintained a racial hierarchy through pedagogies elevating the ‘native speaker’. The prominence of adverts for proficiency exams further reinforced this ideology and the need to measure oneself against ‘native’ English for personal and professional advancement. However, this was subverted to some extent by the contributions of those who worked in the ILC, who not only wrote translanguage and other multilingual texts but actively encouraged the use of Japanese (Figure 8).

The English teaching staff and institution of the university both drew legitimacy from the designation of the former as ‘native speakers’ in the schoolscape. A series of posters in the stairwell introduced each teacher as ‘from’ either Japan or a majority Anglophone country. Each poster included a map of the teacher’s ‘home’ country with their ‘hometown’ marked and named. Other details included their hobbies, but nothing pertaining to their role as a teacher. These posters reduced complex teacher identities to

a single nationality and legitimized their role as teachers and English speakers on the grounds of that nationality rather than on experience or qualifications.

The university also drew benefits from this as the landscape was used to ‘sell’ the university to prospective students and their parents. Edward discussed how the building was used for filming PR videos, as a stop on tours for prospective students, and as the location for press conferences. Through the use of visible English and the connection of that English to the English of the native speaker – the ‘naturally’ most important language and the ‘naturally’ most pure form of the language, necessary for economic advancement and the achievement of full personhood – the university was marketed as aspirational and modern (Backhaus, 2019; Rowland, 2016; Wang, 2015).

Other texts undermined both the self/other binary and the myth of the native-speaker’s superiority. Most of the texts attributable to students included English. Though such texts made up only a small proportion of the total, their existence demonstrated that at least some students considered themselves to have an element of ownership over English, potentially undermining the idea of the monolingual nation (Kobayashi, 2023). Furthermore, these examples often exhibited structures that have been suggested as features of a distinct Japanese variety of English. Whether or not such features can be categorised as a ‘Japanese-English’ is perhaps less important than the indication that for some students local influences may be more relevant than the native-speaker standard (D’Angelo et. al., 2022). This has implications for classroom practices as there is an apparent asymmetry between top-down language policy and the bottom-up language ideologies held by some students. It also suggests that a first step to decolonising the linguistic landscape would be to give greater freedom to students to create texts within it.

Border thinking and translanguaging

The most common form of multilingual text in the schoolscape were texts with the same message in different languages. Mary and Elizabeth explained they used this strategy because they expected Japanese students would be unable to read anything other than extremely simple English and that non-Japanese visitors would be able to read English but not simple Japanese. Such attitudes reflect the myth of monolingualism and the assumed universality of English.

Some authors attempted to subvert coloniality by crossing or blurring the boundaries between self and other. Of the four forms of multilingual texts discovered in the landscape, two represented limited border crossing moves. Texts with different languages for the header and body and texts with different information written in different languages may reflect an assumption that the potential audience have adequate literacy in both languages to understand the message of the sign (Inoue, 2005). This stance recognises that one does not have to be Japanese to understand Japanese, and that Japanese people can understand English. However, such texts still enforce the idea of distinct languages, and therefore can be understood as supporting plural monolingualisms rather than questioning the colonial constructions of language (Pennycook, 2006). In contrast, the texts coded as ‘translanguage’ saw the authors drawing on a wider range of linguistic resources without accepting the need to categorize those resources as belonging to one language or another. Such translanguaging in linguistic landscapes is considered a form of ‘border thinking’ and recognised as a decolonial practice as it problematises the idea of discreet languages (Lee, 2025).

Tension was reflected in the decisions made by Mary in creating multilingual

texts. Writing in her capacity as a student member of staff, she followed the prevailing conventions of providing texts in both English and Japanese for audiences assumed to speak one or the other of these distinct languages. Writing in a more personal capacity, Mary drew on her linguistic resources in ways that confounded the distinctions between a monolingual Japanese-speaking self and monolingual English-speaking other, blurring the distinctions between the two languages.

Conclusion

The ILC schoolscape is a contested arena where coloniality is both reproduced and undermined. The hidden curriculum in the schoolscape reinforced the colonial matrix of power by enforcing the racial hierarchy between ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ speakers, by making invisible non-English and non-Japanese languages and identities, and by homogenising Japanese and non-Japanese identities and languages. However, in some texts, students and staff undermined the distinction between Japanese-speaking Japanese people and English-speaking others. In certain cases, distinctions between the two languages themselves were also undermined by translanguaging practices. Yet these subversive texts represented only a small proportion of the total, showing that opportunities for undermining coloniality were limited and that the landscape remained highly controlled.

This study has focused on the creation of the linguistic landscape and so the perspectives of those who experience the landscape but do not have or exercise the agency to form it are missing. Further studies could be carried out in the same site to enable teachers, students, and others to share their experiences of being in the landscape, their beliefs about the landscape, and how the landscape interacts with their personal language ideologies.

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Table 1. Included and excluded text types.

Included	Excluded
Certificates attached to equipment	Book/DVD/CD/Magazine spines and covers
Decorative materials	Clothing or bags
Handwritten notes posted in public spaces	Garbage
Installed signs	Leaflets, pamphlets and business cards
Posters	Private screens, such as smartphones or tablets
Public screens	

Table 2. Number of texts by month.

Month	Number of texts	Major events
May	605	
June	573	Reduced COVID-19 measures
July	593	Tanabata Festival Sports and E-sports festival
October	610	
November	655	Halloween Student-led Culture Festival English Presentation Contest
December	650	Christmas / New Year English Presentation Contest

Table 3. Categories and codes.

Category	Code	Frequency
Language	Chinese	3
	English	3181
	Japanese	1806
	Korean	3
	Latin	7
Language mix	Translation	809
	Different information	486
	Header/body	597
	Translanguage	256
Function	To advertise product/service/event	828
	To certify	47
	To communicate personal message	4
	To decorate	278
	To direct	55
	To inform	442
	To instruct/request	361
	To label	1595
	To warn	79
Author	ILC / SAC	782
	Student group	129
	Student	107
	Teacher group	38
	Teacher	10
	Other university department	98
Content	Exams	139
	Festival	100
	Language skills 1	197
	Language skills 2	20
	Universal English	39

Table 4. Participants.

LL-actor	Role in creating the linguistic landscape	Self-described language profile
Mary	Graduate student (non-English major) working part-time in the SAC. Creates posters for display. Previously involved in the student English Speaking Circle.	Japanese, studied English as a compulsory subject at school and university
Elizabeth	Part-time member of staff in the SAC. Creates posters, labels and schedules for display.	Japanese, graduated from university as an English major, took elective courses in Italian, learned some Korean informally
Edward	Head of the English teaching department. Involved in the interior design of the building at the time of construction.	English, Japanese at work

Table 5. Languages and language mixes.

	English only	Japanese only	English and Japanese	English and Latin	Japanese, Chinese and Korean
Month					
May	310	93	200	2	0
June	278	85	209	0	1
July	303	71	219	0	0
October	307	80	220	2	1
November	326	114	213	2	0
December	346	84	218	1	1

Table 6. Language mixes and functions.

Function	Total Texts	English Only	Japanese Only	Translation	Header/ Body	Different Information	Translanguage
To advertise	828	23	122	361	467	246	180
To certify	47	0	47	0	0	0	0
To communicate personal message	4	0	3	0	0	0	1
To decorate	278	233	34	13	1	9	1
To direct	55	51	0	3	3	1	1
To inform	441	89	56	209	77	193	41
To instruct/request	361	120	110	107	30	26	18
To label	1620	1335	118	120	22	12	10
To warn	79	27	42	6	0	1	3

Table 7. Language mixes and author

Author	Total Texts	English Only	Japanese Only	Translation	Header/ Body	Different Information	Translanguage
ILC / SAC	782	110	17	447	342	315	147
Student group	154	1	41	18	67	20	38
Student	107	40	4	12	13	62	25
Teacher group	38	11	6	14	18	2	8
Teacher	10	2	0	1	0	6	4
Other university	98	0	94	1	2	3	1



Figure 1. Multiple texts within one frame.

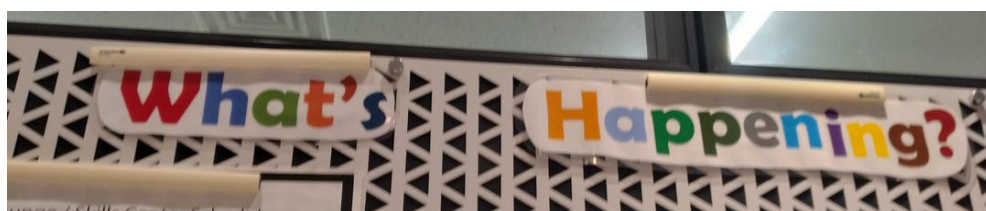


Figure 2. One text across two frames.

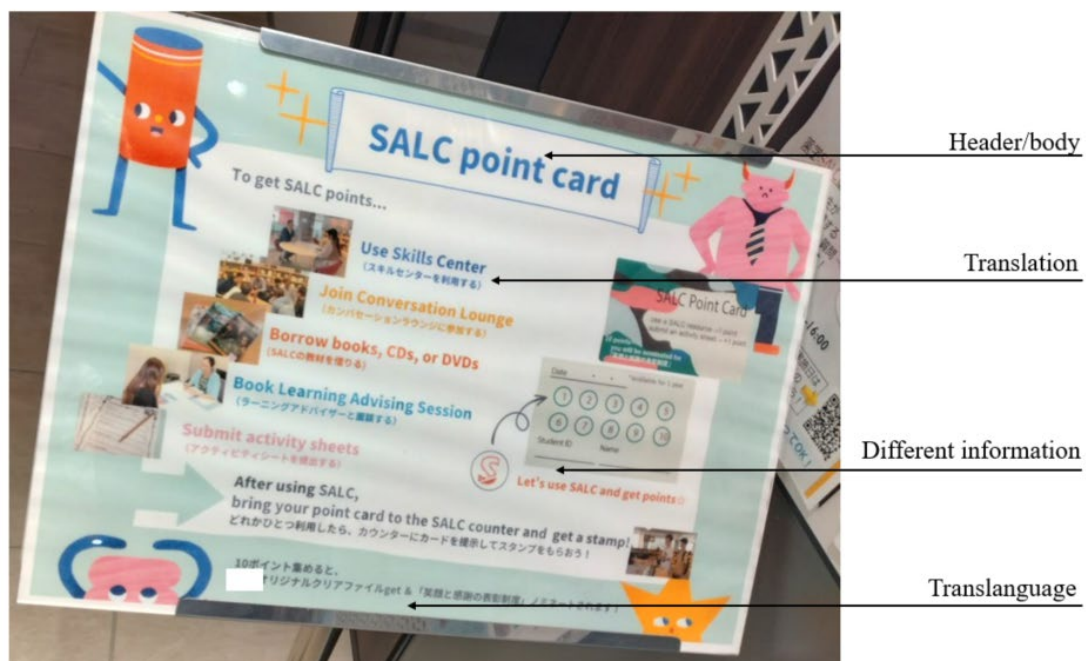


Figure 3. Language mix codes.

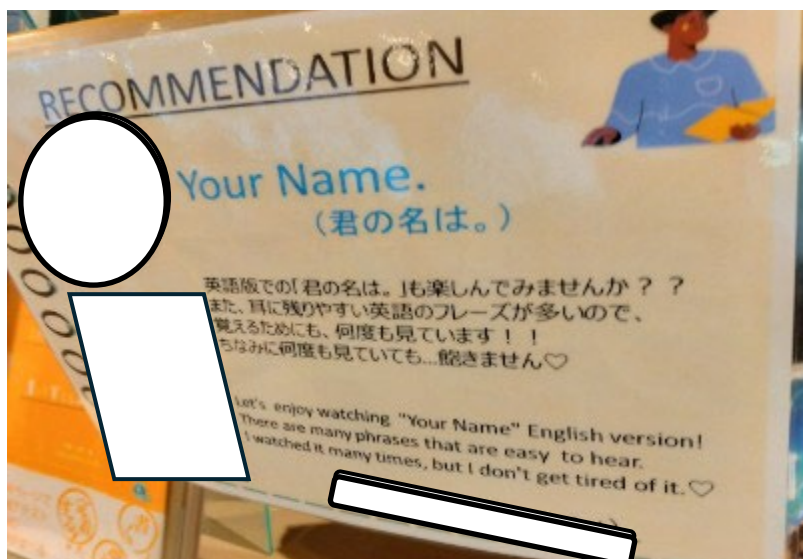


Figure 4. Use of ‘there + quantifier’ in a student text.

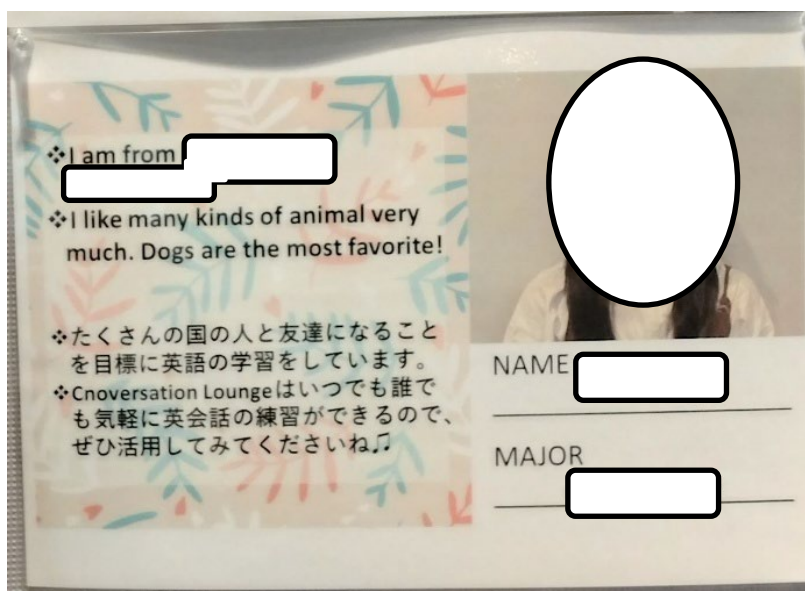


Figure 5. ‘Unagi’ sentence in a student text: “Dogs are the most favorite!” and a description of English as a universal language in the third bullet point, which reads “I am learning English with the goal of making friends with people from many countries.”

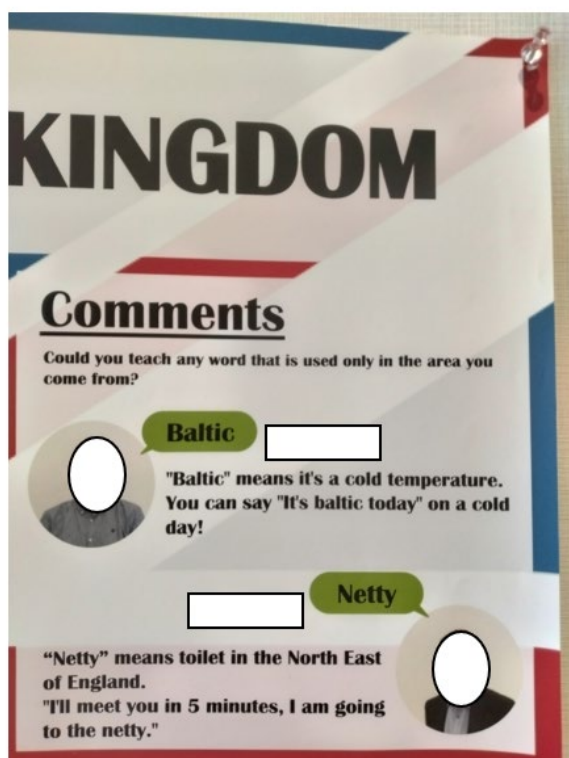


Figure 6. Examples of non-U.S. Englishes.

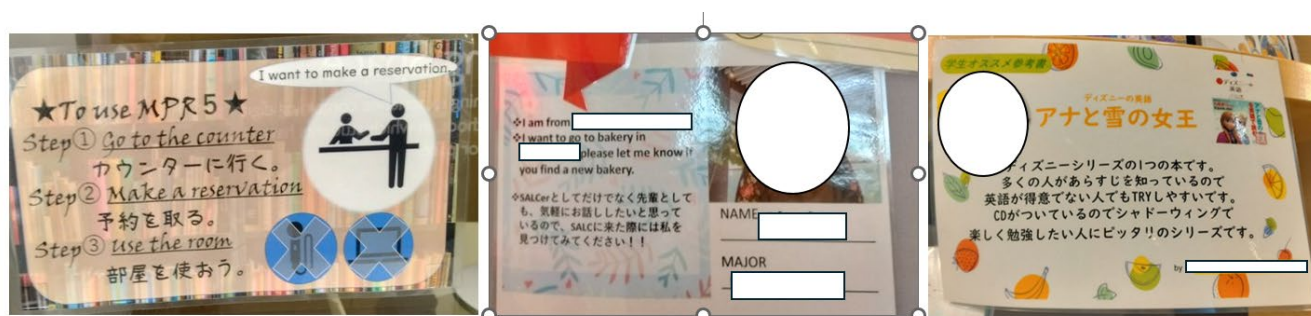


Figure 7. Mary's multilingual texts.

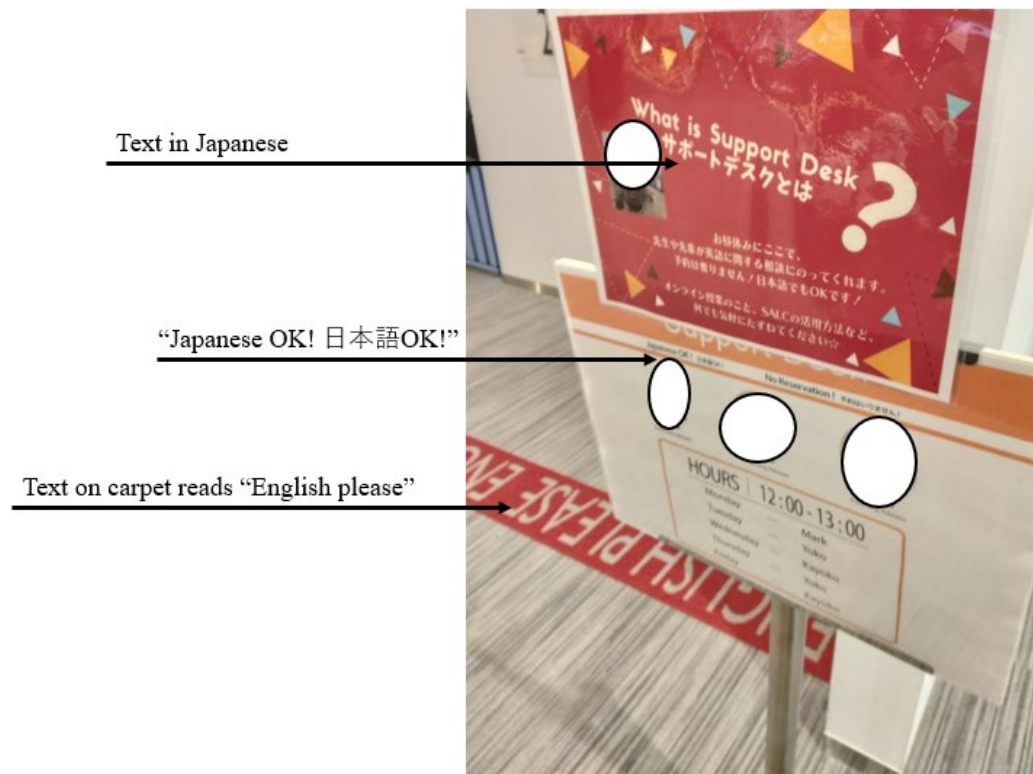


Figure 8. Enforcing and undermining English-only policies.