

A Comparative Study on Linguistic Landscapes between China and America During COVID-19 Based on Polyphony Theory

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Manuscript received September 17, 2024; revised November 4, 2024; accepted January 17, 2025; published March 27, 2025.

Abstract—In 2020, the abrupt emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic had an unparalleled impact on the globe. Amid the pandemic, diverse linguistic landscapes surfaced in China and America, illustrating distinct social contexts and fostering multifaceted dialogues. To gain insights into the variations in linguistic landscapes between these two nations, the present study conducts a comparative study of polyphonic phenomena observed in 60 linguistic landscapes collected during 2020. Through examining the content within the polyphonic structure of these landscapes, it is evident that the Chinese linguistic landscape, ranging from micro-dialogue to large-scale dialogue, revolves closely around the prevention and control of the COVID-19 crisis, emphasizes the dual subjectivity of communicators and recipients, and ultimately fosters a polyphonic environment conducive to collective participation and unity in combating the pandemic. Conversely, the landscape themes associated with the pandemic in the United States appear fragmented, reflecting an open polyphonic characteristic that, to some extent, undermines effective prevention and control measures. This study contributes to our comprehension of the implications associated with linguistic landscapes in two nations and offers guidance for establishing effective linguistic environments in addressing significant emergencies.

Keywords—linguistic landscape, comparative study, polyphony theory, COVID-19

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly spread across the globe. Throughout the crisis in China and America, various linguistic landscapes emerged, including banners, slogans, and posters, which served as crucial indicators of the social situations in affected areas. These visual elements also functioned as essential bridges for fostering dialogical relationships between different parties.

Employing Bakhtin's Polyphony Theory as a framework, this paper examines 30 linguistic landscapes that surfaced in China and the United States during the pandemic and conducts a comparative analysis of the polyphonic characteristics of these landscapes. Investigating linguistic landscapes offers a fresh perspective on contemporary social events, particularly through the lens of Dialogue Theory.

The aims of this study are twofold: (1) to provide a comparative analysis of the different types of linguistic landscapes that emerged during the pandemic in China and the United States, and to examine the features of their dialogues as well as the two countries' images; (2) to assess the sociocultural distinctions and underlying concepts in each country's linguistic landscape and offer suggestions for constructing linguistic landscapes under significant

emergency situations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Previous Studies on Linguistic Landscape

The linguistic landscape is an emerging field within sociolinguistics that focuses on how language is used in public space [1]. Gorter introduced the Geosemiotics theoretical approach to study how linguistic signs manifest and influence social literacy practices [2]. Ben-Rafael suggested four principles for constructing linguistic landscapes: (1) Presentation of Self, (2) Good Reasons, (3) Collective Identity, and (4) Power relations [3]. Huebner proposed the SPEAKING model for linguistic landscape analysis to comprehensively analyze linguistic signs, making the research more methodical [4]. The scope of linguistic landscape research has expanded to include a wide range of public spaces and multimodal forms of linguistic displays. Researchers from various academic disciplines have explored linguistic landscapes in language education, tourism, business, and urban planning [5].

Domestic research in linguistic landscapes is still in its early stages compared to international research. Sun first introduced the term "linguistic landscape" in his article focusing on translation and communication strategies [6]. Local studies have primarily focused on public signs, with half of the research involving sign transliteration [7]. Although some studies have expanded to include urban multilingualism and language vitality, achievements in this area remain limited. To enhance the understanding of linguistic landscapes and their connection to social reality, future domestic studies should focus on atypical signs like parade banners, graffiti, and street art [8].

B. Previous Research on Polyphony Theory

In his work "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," Bakhtin discusses the concept of polyphony in Fyodor Dostoevsky's prose, where various independent voices coexist [9]. Polyphony, drawing from a Greek musical term, represents a multiplicity of distinct voices and consciousnesses that express their ideas freely without the author's control. Bakhtin posits that polyphonic novels exhibit both micro dialogue, which involves individual consciousnesses interacting within a person, and great dialogue, which reflects a broader collision of ideas and positions in the novel.

The idea of great dialogue is rooted in the construction of micro dialogues, and the merging of these individual dialogues can create a harmonious polyphonic scene

beneficial to the narrative's development. Recognizing the significance of Bakhtin's Polyphony Theory, French structuralists Kristeva and Todorov introduced it to Western academia, where scholars have explored its connections with Marxism, cultural studies, postmodernism, and literary genre discourse.

In domestic scholarship, research on Polyphony Theory began in the latter half of the twentieth century, evolving through three distinct phases structured by Xia: the emergence from foreign literature teaching, in-depth studies of Bakhtin's theory, and the practical implementation of his ideas [10]. Current research in China can be broadly categorized into theoretical investigations, such as Qian, Dong, and Liu's examination from narratological, cultural, and philosophical perspectives, and practical applications that integrate Polyphony Theory with literary works, exemplified by Peng and Liu [11-12]. Moreover, Bakhtin's Dialogue Theory intersects with disciplines like pedagogy, public communication, and discourse analysis, expanding its reach beyond literary studies.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

The following two questions guide the current study.

1. What are the differences in the choice of language and the use of dialogical discourse in linguistic landscape in China and America?
2. What are the images of the two countries constructed by the respective linguistic landscapes, and what are the differences in socio-cultural realities and value behind the linguistic landscapes of the two countries?

B. Data Collection

China and America are compelling choices for the current study due to their vast geopolitical influence, cultural diversity, and distinct linguistic policies. China represents a complex interplay of national language promotion alongside regional dialects and minority languages, influenced by its history and rapid modernization. In contrast, the United States showcases a multilingual landscape shaped by immigration, cultural pluralism, and legal protections for linguistic diversity. Comparing these two nations offers insights into how language reflects societal values, political dynamics, and economic trends on a global scale. Therefore, by contrasting the linguistic landscapes of China and the United States, we can identify unique trends, similarities, and influences that shape language use and public communication. This approach not only highlights regional differences but also reveals underlying global trends in language policy, cultural identity, and urban development.

The selection criteria are established based on research needs, focusing on content related to COVID-19 and the removal of invalid duplicates. Following the exclusion of irrelevant data, the results are organized according to the linguistic landscape classification criteria, ultimately yielding a total of 60 typical pandemic-related linguistic landscapes in three categories: propaganda signs, supply signs, and banners.

Table 1. Number of linguistic landscape

	Propaganda Signs	Relief Supplies Signs	Banners	Total
China	18	6	6	30
America	18	1	11	30

C. Qualitative Analysis from the Perspective of Dialogue Theory

Grounded in the key concepts of Bakhtin's polyphony theory, which serves as the theoretical framework for this paper, the study employs content analysis and case study as its primary research methods. Upon selecting the representative linguistic signs for the case study, this research investigates the textual aspects of linguistic landscapes, aiming to uncover the distinctive characteristics, differences, and impacts of these landscapes in China and the United States, while shedding light on the underlying socio-cultural realities. To achieve this, the analysis draws on the following principles: "Comparison of Expressive Features," "Analysis of Dialogic Utility," "Image of Dialogue Subjects," and "Suggestions for Linguistic Landscape Applications." These principles guide the analysis, conducted in subsequent steps.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. The Polyphony of Linguistic Landscape in China

1) Micro dialogue

Although micro-dialogue may appear as a one-way speech on the surface, it still establishes a dialogical relationship within an individual. This is because, with two distinct consciousnesses involved, the character acts as both initiator and audience of the dialogue. Furthermore, when the micro-dialogue is visible and accessible to the public, it constructs an underlying dialogical relationship with the audience. Bakhtin posits that micro-dialogue in polyphony is primarily characterized by the presence of double voices and the inclusion of monologue within an individual [13].

Two representative examples of double-voice dialogue in the Chinese linguistic landscape are: "口罩还是呼吸机? 您老看着二选一" "戴口罩和戴呼吸机哪个好? 躺家里和躺ICU哪个强?" ("Which is better, to wear a mask or use a ventilator?") (Is it better to stay at home or in the ICU?") Though these banners may seem like single statements from their creators, they actually encompass two subjects and voices – those of the questioner and the responder – and the voices of the initiators as well as the audience in the dialogue. On one hand, the answers are self-evident to the creators, yet they pose questions on behalf of the public's interests and concerns. Conversely, the creators are also part of the public. In essence, they engage in a dialogue where they converse with themselves while also establishing a dialogical relationship with other audiences, highlighting the importance of self-protection.



Fig. 1. Linguistic landscape of micro dialogue in China.

In addition to double-voice dialogue, monologic dialogue. Is prevalent in the Chinese linguistic landscape. For instance, the banner stating, “待到山花烂漫时，走亲访友不得迟” (“It’s not too late to visit relatives and friends when the flowers are in full bloom”) serves as a poetic and literary sign, encouraging people to refrain from visiting loved ones. Simultaneously, it represents the creator’s monologic voice of self-soothing during the pandemic. Visiting relatives and friends during the Spring Festival is a deeply-rooted cultural tradition in China that has continued uninterrupted for many years. Consequently, it is natural for people to feel a sense of loss and even resistance toward this sudden disruption. However, considering the severity of COVID-19, it is vital to prioritize the bigger picture and postpone gatherings until the pandemic subsides. Moreover, owing to the sign’s visibility, this inner self-soothing monologue communicates not only with the sign-maker but also with the public, urging them to cooperate with the government. By taking into account the cultural background and psychological factors and considering the audience’s perspective, this micro-dialogue is more likely to resonate with the public and achieve a greater promotional effect.

2) Great dialogue

Due to the shared nature of discourse between literary works and linguistic landscapes, the polyphony of linguistic landscapes exhibits similar characteristics. Each creator of linguistic signs assumes the roles of both author and character, with each constructed dialogue forming a part of the broader polyphonic scene. While geographic constraints seemingly disperse the dialogues generated by linguistic landscapes across China, these individual instances are inextricably linked by the common goal of combatting the pandemic. Drawing on distinct perspectives to communicate their understanding of prevention and control measures, individuals create signs that correspond with dialogues elsewhere. For instance, the sign “Wear masks when you go out, wash your hands when you come in, and do not throw masks around. We have made a contribution to the early pandemic” resonates with and responds to “Wearing a mask is an effective means of interrupting the spread of the virus through respiratory secretions.” Despite existing in separate spaces and times, these signs engage with and complement each other. Consequently, these geographically disparate linguistic landscapes assemble a structurally dialogic relationship at a national level, centered around their shared objective: the fight against COVID-19.



Fig. 2. Linguistic landscape of great dialogue in China.

This harmonious dialogical relationship also exists on a global level, as seen through the incorporation of specifically tailored signs on relief materials sent to foreign countries. As a responsible world power, China has taken an active role in the global fight against the pandemic. Relief supplies delivered to various countries are marked with specially designed signs, some of which are illustrated below.

Table 2. Relief supplies signs from China

Japan	Africa	Serbia	Italy
青山一道，同 担风雨 (Like the mountain range that stretches before you and me, let’s share the same trials and hardships together.)	人心齐， 泰山移 (When people are determined they can overcome anything.)	铁杆朋友， 风雨同行 (ЧЕЛИЧНИ ПРИЈАТЕЉИ, ДЕЛИМО И ДОБРО И Эло!)	消失吧黑夜！ 黎明时我们终 将获胜！ (Dilegua, o notte! All’alba vincero! Vincero! Vincero!)

This bilingual linguistic landscape not only signifies the deeply consolidated friendship and robust cooperative relations between China and other countries but also motivates individuals to unite against COVID-19. On one hand, employing a bilingual format, rather than exclusively using Chinese, enables local communities to swiftly comprehend the message. On the other hand, whether it is a renowned quote, a proverb, or a song, all the elements emanate from the local region. By taking the local cultural context into account, audiences can more easily engage and react to the discourse with emotional resonance. In unison, these micro dialogues and larger conversations merge to form the polyphony of the Chinese linguistic landscape, fostering a positive and cohesive environment, which contributes to the pandemic’s control and prevention.

B. The Polyphony of Linguistic Landscape in America

None of the characters in this context are self-aware; they assess and respond to the external world from their personal perspectives, the consciousness they exhibit is not that of the author but rather their individual inner thoughts. In essence, polyphony is characterized by its openness and inclusivity; people can express their viewpoints and ideas freely on an equal footing. In the American linguistic landscape, this polyphonic scene is similarly constructed, showcasing diverse voices from various standpoints with equal status.

1) Micro dialogue

As mentioned above, micro dialogue mainly expressed as double voices dialogue and monologic dialogue. For America, the majority of the linguistic landscape adopts the form of monologic dialogue to express their different views and attitudes toward the COVID-19. Different standpoints of sign makers in America are shown as follows.

The American people convey their perspectives on the pandemic from differing viewpoints. This genuine expression of their thoughts and consciousness accentuates the polyphonic nature of the American linguistic landscape, as they represent diverse voices from various positions. As illustrated in the provided table, there are those who express

doubts regarding the outbreak’s authenticity, such as “COVID-19 IS REAL BUT THE PANDEMIC IS NOT” and “COVID-19, A TEST RUN AT SOCIALISM.” Conversely, some signs showcase support and cooperation with government policies, like “HELP FIGHT COVID-19” and “PROTEST AGAINST COVID-19.” In addition, certain signs display opposition and dissatisfaction with the government’s COVID-19 control measures. For instance, “THIS IS POLITICAL NOT MEDICAL” and “COCKTAILS AND FREEDOM” illustrate some individuals’ sentiments that the mandatory policy is an arbitrary exercise of power and an infringement upon their long-standing tradition of freedom. This antagonistic and conflicting stance with the government is also evident.

These monologic dialogues with differing positions emphasize the open-ended nature of polyphony while simultaneously enhancing the polyphonic quality of the American linguistic landscape.

Table 3. Different standpoints of sign makers

For human rights	For economy reopening	Doubt about the truth of COVID-19	Support the policy
			
COCKTAILS AND FREEDOM	GOVERNMENT ABOVE LET US OPEN	COVID-19 A TEST RUN AT SOCIALISM	HELP FIGHT COVID-19
			
THIS IS POLITICAL NOT MEDICAL	KEEP OUR CITY ALIVE	COVID-19 IS REAL BUT THE PANDEMIC IS NOT	PROTEST AGAINST COVID-19

2) Great dialogue

Due to varying perspectives of sign creators, their divergent monologic dialogues generate a grand dialogue on a national scale as well. Each sign represents the creators’ viewpoint and voice; therefore, under similar societal circumstances, the presence of distinct linguistic signs is a response to signs reflecting different positions. Although these signs may exhibit a dialogical relationship characterized by antagonism and conflict, they maintain equal status and value, as they fundamentally embody human thoughts and opinions.

Signs advocating cooperation with the government, such as “NO FACE MASK NO ENTRY,” not only reflect the creators’ proactive stance against the pandemic but also counteract signs opposing government policies, like “TEXAS WILL NOT WEAR THE MARK OF THE BEAST,” which claims that the mandatory wearing of masks signifies an evil act. Posts promoting solidarity in combating the pandemic, such as “THE VIRUS IS OUR ENEMY, NOT CHINA,” challenge misleading signs like “CLOSE THE BORDER, SAY NO TO CHINA,” which can obscure public understanding of the outbreak’s truth and aggravate tensions between the two countries.



Fig. 3. Linguistic landscape of great dialogue in America.

In summary, from the perspective of Dialogue Theory, the Chinese linguistic landscape is inherently dialogic, as it emphasizes the dual subjectivity of the initiator and the audience. In other words, the Chinese linguistic landscape takes into account both the initiator’s context and the audience’s socio-cultural background, thereby fostering a more engaged dialogue. For Bakhtin, dialogue serves as the fundamental unit of human linguistic and cultural behavior, forming the basis of his subject-oriented, response-driven, and polyphonic model of dialogic communication, which is precisely exhibited in the polyphony of the Chinese linguistic landscape. This harmonious polyphonic scene significantly contributes to the successful containment of COVID-19 in China.

Secondly, the openness of communication characterizes the American linguistic landscape’s polyphonic scene, which is crucial in promoting the propagation of new ideas. Its dialogue is neither a singular monologue nor an absolute homogeneity of voices derived from multiculturalism; otherwise, closed monolingualism would eventually suppress and extinguish polyphonic dialogue. This means that the polyphony of the American linguistic landscape enables dialogue participants to retain their authentic independent identity, allowing equal status and value in communication between initiators and audiences. However, the fragmented nature of this polyphony complicates efforts to counteract the pandemic.

C. Comparative Analysis of the Constructed Images and Underlying Values between China and America

1) The main images constructed by linguistic landscape

Subjects in a linguistic landscape unify attention towards the same object, embodying a nation’s policy direction and attitude. A comprehensive understanding of this landscape visually represents a nation’s stance on challenges. Amid China’s COVID-19 response, swift and effective actions were taken, including classifying the virus as Class A, activating nationwide public health responses, and temporarily halting the economy. Under the Central Committee’s leadership, led by Comrade Xi Jinping, the nation united against the virus.

During this period, diverse and positive linguistic expressions emerged within China, aiding in pandemic control. Despite initial limited knowledge, grassroots communities were empowered to create tailored materials for swift containment. From bold banners to poetic messages, these linguistic landscapes shared the goal of defeating COVID-19.

Internationally, China promoted a Community of Shared

Future for Mankind, engaging in transparent cooperation and support. After containing the virus domestically, China provided aid to other nations through linguistic messages, showcasing its responsible global role. Conversely, the U.S. focus on freedom led to a fragmented response and public discontent.

By December 31st, 2020, the U.S. had the highest COVID-19 cases and deaths globally. One phrase, "FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE," on aid supplies lacked cultural sensitivity and reflected a hierarchical stance in international relations, revealing an indifferent approach to public safety amidst the pandemic.

2) Social and cultural values behind linguistic landscape

Diverse socio-cultural contexts shape unique linguistic landscapes tailored to specific audiences. China's domestic landscape targets the general public, accommodating varying realities through tailored dialogues. While rural areas utilize direct conversational slogans for effective communication, urban regions use poetic language to combat pandemics and maintain aesthetic appeal. Globally, China customizes dialogues based on individual countries' cultural backgrounds and diplomatic relations, incorporating local elements to foster dialogue and promote cultural diversity.

The Chinese linguistic landscape embodies traditional values and diverse language policies, reflecting a people-centric approach and collective visions for a Shared Future for Mankind. Conversely, the American domestic landscape exhibits conflicting dialogic signs, reflecting a lack of unified understanding of the pandemic and emphasizing liberal social values. America's consumerist culture leads to mass consumption and financial struggles among low- to middle-income groups, with low savings rates below 10%.

The economic impact of the pandemic has resulted in historic levels of unemployment and financial challenges, particularly affecting vulnerable populations. Calls through the linguistic landscape reflect the desire to reopen the economy, emphasizing freedom and consumerism.

V. CONCLUSION

This comparative study examines the differing linguistic landscapes of China and the United States. China, propelled by collectivism and the Shared Future for Mankind concept, shapes its linguistic environment domestically and internationally. Compliance with China's national immunization policy generates diverse linguistic landscapes, fostering nationwide discourse. China's provision of relief supplies and culturally tailored linguistic signs to foreign nations showcases respect for diversity and global responsibility, nurturing reciprocal relationships. In contrast, the U.S.'s focus on freedom and consumerism amid the pandemic has led to spontaneous public demonstrations and a slow government response, exacerbating conflicts in the linguistic landscape and impeding pandemic control efforts. Furthermore, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) signage in international relief efforts offers a one-sided dialogue, undermining the creation of a positive national image. Moreover, this study deepens our understanding of the implications of linguistic environments in two countries and offers guidance on creating effective language landscapes in reaction to significant emergencies.

The contrasting pandemic responses of China and the U.S. underscore the impact of domestic and global linguistic landscapes on national representation and dialogue. Three recommendations are proposed to enhance national images and promote effective engagement through linguistic landscapes:

- a) Swift emergency responses and clear guidance are crucial for public understanding and infection control. In the U.S., delays in government responses have hindered public awareness, leading to increased virus transmission through gatherings and protests. Developing timely and appropriate linguistic landscapes is key for effectively managing crises.
- b) Tailoring linguistic landscapes to diverse audiences' backgrounds and needs is essential for positive dialogue. For instance, China's creation of diverse linguistic landscapes accounts for different levels of development in rural areas. Government guidance is necessary to maintain coherence among public linguistic expressions.
- c) Respecting cultural diversity and global responsibility in international interactions is crucial for fostering harmonious relationships. China's bilingual signage on relief supplies demonstrates this commitment, aiding recipients while showcasing international responsibility.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Zecong Tang completed the experimental design of this study and the writing of subsequent articles; Yi Zhang gave guidance to the writing of the overall content of the article; both authors had approved the final version.

FUNDING

Sponsored by the Practice and Innovation Funds for Graduate Students of Northwestern Polytechnical University (PF2024103).

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