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View from the Green Line: A Photographic Essay of University Avenue's Linguistic
Landscape

by

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ST. CATHERINE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Within the discipline of sociolinguistics is a new area of study referred to as linguistic landscapes. The publicly displayed words and images that compose a linguistic landscape are able to tell us about a specific environment's demographics such as the languages spoken by its community members, the countries where the speakers have originated from, and how these immigrant groups identify themselves within wider English-speaking society. In a linguistic landscape where English is the dominant language, St. Paul, Minnesota's University Avenue presents numerous languages representative of the local immigrant groups. A survey of the avenue's linguistic landscape reveals public signs displayed in Tagalog, Vietnamese, Chinese, African languages, Somali, Spanish, Cambodian, and Arabic. Commentary provided on these signs offers insight as to how local immigrant groups have navigated the relationship between language, culture, and identity.

Introduction

In 1968, my grandparents, my father, and my aunt and uncles emigrated from the Philippines to Seattle, Washington. A year after arriving in the United States, they relocated to South St. Paul, Minnesota and have lived in the Twin Cities ever since.

Since my grandparents continued to cook the recipes they brought over from the Philippines, they frequently brought me to pick up ingredients at Phil.-Oriental Foods, an Asian market near the corner of University Avenue W and N Avon Street. From our numerous visits, I have many fond memories of hearing my grandparents converse with the storeowner in Tagalog while I meandered through the aisles and observed the colorful food labels. Even as a child, I remember seeing things I never would have seen around my hometown Cub Foods in the suburbs.

On University Avenue, I saw that there were languages displayed that weren't English. There were fascinating restaurants that sold food that wasn't burgers and fries. There were people that weren't blonde-haired and blue-eyed and hadn't lived in Minnesota their entire lives. On University Avenue, there was diversity unlike anything I had ever known growing up outside of the cities. Though I have grown up stopping by University only occasionally, I have continued to find it an interesting environment. Recalling the different languages, cultures, and people that I encountered on University Avenue as a child sustained my interest to the extent that I still expected to find a diverse linguistic landscape today. This interest is what led me to choose this area as the setting for my linguistic landscape project, a photographic essay examining the linguistic landscape of University Avenue entitled, "View from the Green Line: A Photographic Essay of University Avenue's Linguistic Landscape."

The discipline of sociolinguistics focuses both on language and society and the effects of language within society. A more specific area within this discipline examines linguistic landscapes, a fairly new area of study that looks at the presence of words and languages in public domains. According to sociolinguists Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorter in *Linguistic Landscape: Expanding the Scenery*, a linguistic landscape is defined as the “words and images displayed and exposed in public spaces” (1). These words and images need not be commercially produced; they can vary from advertisements on billboards and signs on official community buildings to handwritten fliers in a window.

Additionally, Landry and Bourhis, two pioneer sociolinguists in the field, elaborate on other elements found within a linguistic landscape: “public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings” (15). Publicly displayed words do not lend to an exploration of the community’s group and individual identities unless a context is given. A historical, political, social, or economic context strengthens the connection between language and community identity. Put simply, further analysis of these public words and images reveal much more than an initial glance would. Who are the residents of this area? Are their languages represented in these public displays? If these languages are represented, what do these publicly displayed words say about the speakers’ community? My analysis of University Avenue’s linguistic landscape will seek to explore these questions.

Focus of Study

Spanning from the Minnesota State Capitol to Blaine, Minnesota, University Avenue is a vibrant area that is representative of Minnesota’s diverse population. The area of

focus for this study will be the St. Paul end of the avenue, beginning at Snelling Avenue and going east toward the State Capitol.

As I began to photograph the avenue for this project, I found myself being drawn to a physical perspective from which to shoot. I kept asking myself, what would a person see if they rode the Green Line down University Avenue? What types of establishments would one see from the train window? What establishments stand out? These questions motivated me to schedule the photography sessions in a manner that allowed me to photograph the avenue in three sections. For the first section, I began capturing the signs close to Snelling Avenue and worked my way east for a few blocks until I stopped at Lexington Parkway. The second section picked up a bit further down University, on North Avon Street and ended at Dale Street North. The third section began at the intersection of University and Dale Street North and concluded near the intersection of University Avenue and Mackubin Street.

Methodology

As is commonly used in sociolinguistics, I will be using the SPEAKING model created by Dell Hymes as a way to structure my observations. The SPEAKING model is an oral communication model that analyzes the setting and scene, participants, ends or goals, act sequences, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre (Shohamy & Gorter 71). With my study focusing on written communication rather than oral, I have adapted the components to apply to my study.

Setting is elaborated on with: “the choice of sampling domain is driven by the purpose of the study” (Shohamy & Gorter 72). The purpose of my study is to analyze an area that I predicted would be linguistically (and ideally, ethnically) diverse. Therefore, I

chose to restrict my setting to a small section of the St. Paul end of University Avenue since it features establishments with signage in a variety of languages such as Tagalog, Vietnamese, Chinese, Somali, Spanish, Cambodian and Arabic.

Participants in the model are only relevant when analyzing methods of communication that require people to be present. My study is focusing on the signs set up by commercial businesses and residents rather than the languages spoken by residents; therefore participants will not be directly observed in this study. Rather, by analyzing public signage, I will draw conclusions about the participants—the community members—namely, the ethnic groups they belong to due to the languages displayed in their environment.

Ends, or goals, are the purposes of the communication. In terms of public signage, the purpose usually has to do with advertising a business, identifying places within the community (i.e. street signs), or regulating actions and behavior (i.e. stop signs, “Do not cross” signs, etc.). In the analysis of each photo, I will state what I perceive to be the goal of the sign in addition to commenting on the wider social purpose of the sign’s language.

Act sequences are the forms in which events take place. Van Herk elaborates, stating that act sequences refer to the “content of interaction” (117). This is to say, what is the relation between the creator of the sign and the audience? Perhaps a restaurant is requesting that customers try a new entrée or bring in a friend to get a special deal. Act sequences pay special attention to the purpose and reception of the publicly displayed words.

Key, or cue in the SPEAKING model refers to the tone in which a form of communication is given. Keys can be informal or formal, lighthearted or serious, friendly or distant, etc.

Instrumentalities refer to the forms and styles of speech. Since the focus of the study is publicly displayed words, all instrumentalities for the signs will fall under the form of written communication. Aside from this, the style of the words and phrases will be noted as well.

Perhaps one of the most important components of the SPEAKING model that I will be observing is the **norm**. Norms pay attention to the social rules that govern the communication and record the audience's reaction. For instance, it is uncommon to see informal language on the sign of a law office. Yet, informal language is more expected on a hand-written flier hanging in a window. Formal and informal language uses are the easiest aspects of the 'norm' component to recognize. With the audience again being taken into account, this component of the model ties back to the participants. In terms of social rules, the two groups of signs that I will be observing will be restaurants/other food establishments and community gathering spaces/community service buildings. While each signage can have its own norms documented, all of the signs I have photographed break an overall societal norm: they are not entirely in English. It is in the breakings of these English-only norms where there is room to explore the non-English languages spoken by the signs' participants.

The **genre** is the kind of communication event. Examples of this within spoken communication are a conversation, an argument, etc. Within the scope of this study, the genre will be publicly displayed signs.

Research Findings

With the vast majority of signage being in English, I chose to focus on that which was not; specifically, the languages representative of the area's both longstanding and more recent immigrant groups. It was a surprise to see just how little non-English signage there was. However, with the prevalence of numerous retail and restaurant chains (all with entirely English signage) in the area, the predominance of English was to be assumed. What I found was that the presence of the non-English languages seemed to have two larger purposes: maintaining the old culture and negotiating with the new culture. In each of the three sections of University Avenue, food and community service organizations were the only institutions that displayed non-English signs. The food establishments were either restaurants or markets: Phil.-Oriental Foods, Trung Nam French Bakery, Shuang Hur Supermarket, Makola African Market, Lutong Meken, iPho by Saigon, and Ngon Bistro. The community spaces were: My Home, Inc., Rondo Community Outreach Library, and the Islamic Da'wah Center.

The most noticeable difference between the two types of establishments was the level of English presented. Food establishments tended to be the only places where non-English languages were predominant in the business's name. The names of community gathering spaces, on the other hand, tended to display more English. The degree of non-English inclusion in exterior signage is an indicator of the community's acceptance of non-English within specific domains.

For instance, in each of the restaurants and supermarkets, there is both non-English and English within the business names. The confined representation of these Asian and African languages to the domain of food service signifies that this is one of the few

domains where society is comfortable with foreign language. People like to try different foods—ethnic food is widely accessible and a safe way to experience a small part of a different culture. Dining out and shopping at a place with foreign words in its name may offer customers an experience that is different enough from their personal norms.

Alternately, the presence of non-English within the food domain is non-threatening because it *just* food. Non-English languages and non-Anglo ethnicities can express themselves through food because food is a passive connection between cultures. The presence of a new cuisine from a different ethnic group does not allow room for conflict; the presence of other cuisines does not make people feel people uncomfortable, push them to think politically, or cause them to question their religions. Therefore, the non-English languages associated with the restaurants and markets along University are allowed and accepted.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the widespread use of English in the names of community service organizations signifies a certain level of formality. As with nearly all domains in the United States, English is the chosen language of wider communication. Its prevalence in public domains communicates authority. English is used to send a message that one must conform (at least to a certain extent) to the language used by the rest of society.

The use of English in public domains sheds light on the relationship between language and group identity. On one hand, language is used as a tool to maintain the “old” culture, the one representative of the life before the United States and the language before English. We see this in the photographs of the restaurants and supermarkets. On the signs of each of these establishments, the mother tongue is represented, not yet

erased. A full language shift, from one's first language to English has not yet occurred, either by choice or not. In "Viewing Family Relations Through a Linguistic Lens:

Symbolic Aspects of Language Maintenance in Immigrant Families," Michal

Tannenbaum comments on the effects of shifting languages:

Language shift as part of the immigration process, however, is not a simple or technical act, and it does not reflect only the acquisition of a new language and the broadening of one's horizons. The immigration process also involves loss on many levels, and language shift often involves language loss with all its attendant emotional, interactional, and psychological significance (230).

A mother tongue being represented in a public display is more than just maintenance of one's language; it is maintenance of one's identity.

One outlier to this thought is Phil.-Oriental Foods. The use of 'p' shows signs of assimilation, a shift in identity. Whereas Tagalog speakers would spell it "Filipino" ('f' is a phoneme that exists in Tagalog; 'Ph' is a non-existent spelling in Tagalog.), English speakers tend to spell it "Philipino" since the country of origin is spelled as Philippines. This subtle change in spelling connotes a change in identity—from one that is more Tagalog-speaking and Filipino to one that is more English-speaking and American. As we will continue to see in the additional photographs, language is an incredibly important aspect of identity.

On the other hand, language is also used to negotiate the "new" culture; that is, to assimilate to English-speaking, American culture. In the case of community service organizations, more English is utilized than on the signs of food establishments. These community-gathering spaces function as a way to introduce new immigrants to the widely used language of the area. The first way this is achieved is through their names. The second way is through their purposes.

An outlier for this is the Islamic Da'wah Center. Functioning as a gathering and teaching space for the surrounding Muslim community, the Islamic Da'wah Center is an outlier because of its dual use of Arabic and English as well as its purpose. Featuring English on the front façade and English and Arabic on its side painting, the center places equal emphasis on both languages. Especially on the painting, the Arabic is not more important than the English and the English is not more important than the Arabic. Both work together to fulfill the mission of the da'wah center, which is to invite people—Arabic and English speakers alike—into dialogue so that they can learn more about Islam. Additionally, the purpose of the center is different in that it seeks to foster a religious community around educating rather than to transform an immigrant community through English-speaking.

Photographs of the Landscape



Phil.-Oriental Foods**Location: Near the corner of University Avenue W and N Avon Street**

Owned by a Filipino family that arrived in Minnesota nearly four decades ago, the Phil.-Oriental Foods sign indicates what types of foods are sold inside. A closer look at the sign reveals something deeper. What is particularly interesting about this sign is the use of ‘ph’ in “phil.,” an abbreviation for a word that is otherwise spelled as Filipino. This use of the ‘ph’ rather than the ‘f’ is my focus with this sign because of its ties with the spoken language. Whereas ‘Filipino’ is used by Tagalog-speaking natives of the Philippines to refer to themselves, ‘Philipino’ tends to be used by English-speaking Filipino-Americans to refer to themselves. This subtle difference is evidence of the family’s assimilation into English-speaking American culture. Knowing that the Arcilla family has been in Minnesota since the late 1970s, this assimilation is expected.



Trung Nam French Bakery**Location: Near the corner of University Avenue W and N Grotto Street**

Trung Nam, a Vietnamese name, is connected to the title of ‘French bakery.’ The inclusion of the French influence signals the impact that the years of French colonization had on the country and people of Vietnam. There are three aspects of identity and language in this sign. The first is in regards to Vietnamese, the language and ethnicity of the people who operate the restaurant (seen here as ‘Trung Nam’). The second aspect is in regards to the colonizers of Vietnam (referred to here as the ‘French’ and illustrated by the Eiffel Tower). In regards to this inclusion, it serves a higher purpose than just signaling that France influenced Vietnam; it signals that France controlled Vietnam for decades. The third and final aspect refers to the setting and goals of the sign, the setting being at a permanent restaurant with the goal of selling customers a specific type of cuisine.

**Shuang Hur Supermarket**

Location: University Avenue W, between St. Albans Street N and Dale Street N

Similar to Trung Nam French Bakery, the Shuang Hur Supermarket has multiple dimensions to its signage. Displaying Chinese characters, phonetically spelled Chinese in English letters, and the English word “supermarket”, Shuang Hur contains a variety of languages and multiple levels of signage. I believe this is because the establishment wants to reach multiple audiences, both Chinese and English speakers alike. By choosing multilingual signage, the supermarket not only expands its customer base, but also maintains its Chinese identity in a predominately Anglo landscape. This inclusive sign also caters to those who are still negotiating their mother tongue with the English language. Hence, the double mention in the first two lines—the Chinese characters of the first line translate to ‘Shuang Hur’ as well.

**Makola African Market**

Location: Near the corner of University Avenue W and Arundel Street

Compared to the other food establishments covered so far, Makola stands out in that it represents the various immigrant groups coming from Africa. Up until this location, only various Asian immigrant groups have been represented. Here, not only are some African immigrants recognized, but all are, as demonstrated by the all-inclusive 'African' seen above.

Similar to Phil.-Oriental Foods, Makola serves a larger customer base through its inclusive word choice. Whereas Phil.-Oriental specifically mentions that it serves Filipino cuisine as well as overall Oriental cuisine, Makola jumps to signifying its general product base through the all-encompassing word choice of 'African Market.'

This word choice, however, indicates that the sign is catered to English speakers, not to natives of Africa. An African would likely be more specific in how they identify themselves. They would probably specify which country they come from or which tribe they associate with. By using a blanket term such as 'African,' those who created the sign cater to those who are not from the continent, who don't speak any of the numerous African languages, and who likely only speak English.



Lutong Mekení

Location: University Avenue W, between N Grotto Street and St. Albans Street N

Here we have another Filipino-owned establishment. Unlike Phil.-Oriental Foods' sign, Lutong Mekení's sign spells Filipino with an 'f,' rather than a 'ph.' True to its sign, this is the authentic spelling, the Tagalog way of spelling 'Filipino.' This alternate spelling suggests that the family may be newer to the area and hasn't reached the same degree of assimilation as the Arcilla family of Phil.-Oriental Foods. The linguistic authenticity of the 'f' use caters to a less-assimilated Filipino audience and signals a possible newer immigrant status of the owner(s). Unfortunately, Lutong Mekení is no longer in business, therefore the sign is no longer visible to the public. The area I researched for this study is now back down to one establishment that represents the language, cuisine, and people of the Philippines.



iPho by Saigon

Location: Near the corner of University Avenue W and St. Albans Street North

A play off the trend of beginning words with a lowercase ‘i,’ iPho by Saigon attempts to tie in culture with cuisine. Pho, a traditional Vietnamese dish consisting of broth, rice noodles, and some form of meat is clearly the focus of this sign (as signified by the ‘o’ stylized to look like a bowl of pho). The sign’s use of a cultural trend may be expanding the restaurant’s target audience. Rather than just attracting anyone who loves a good bowl of pho, the restaurant’s stylized name may also attract any curious user of any of Apple’s *i*- products (iPad, iPhone, etc.). Inclusion of ‘Saigon’ signals not only the restaurant’s Vietnamese inspiration, but specifically its identity as a country when it was still under French colonial rule from the mid 1800s to the mid 1900s. Today, what was once referred to as Saigon is now called Ho Chi Minh City.



Ngon Bistro

Location: University Avenue W and N Avon Street

Similar to Trung Nam French Bakery, Ngon Bistro's title also has strong evidence of Vietnam's colonization by France. Containing both a Vietnamese word (ngon) and a French term (bistro), the restaurant acknowledges both the country of its cuisine's origins and the colonizer of the cuisine's country. The restaurant serves Vietnamese-French fusion foods such as mussels, rabbit dumplings, fish fritters, and duck pho.



My Home Inc.

Location: University Avenue W, between St. Albans Street N and Dale Street N



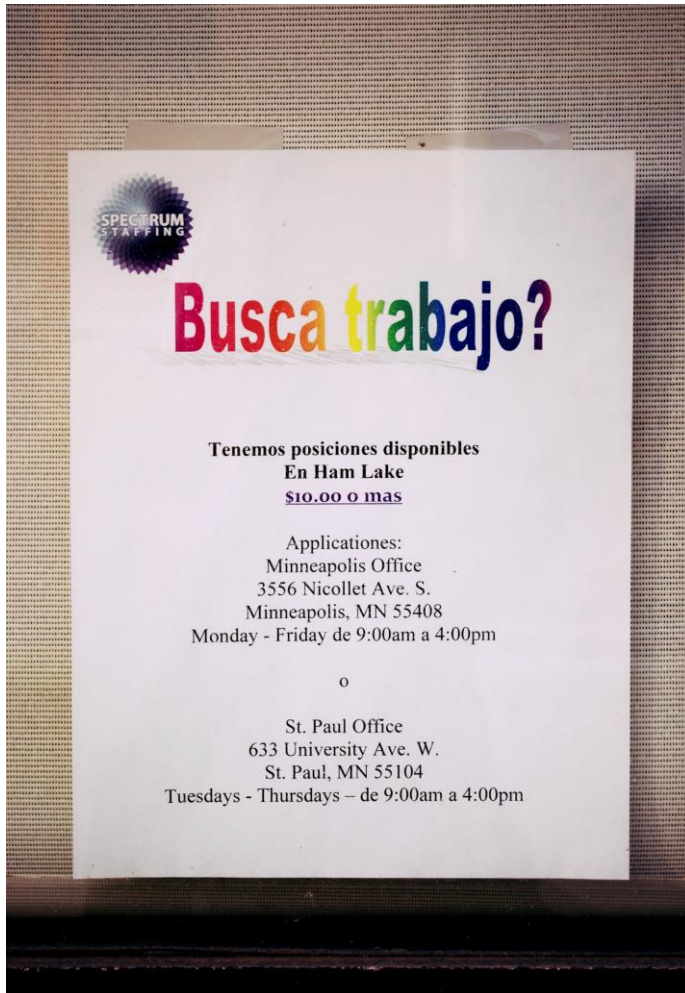
My Home Inc.

Location: University Avenue W, between St. Albans Street N and Dale Street N

Clearly visible on the window of a community organization that seeks to help individuals by “promoting lifestyle and attitude change,” the sign of My Home Inc. presents the window ad only in Somali, which reads: *If you need help with alcohol, drugs, or other types, call 651-442-4021*. This contrast between the business sign and slogan being entirely in English and its call for help being entirely in Somali raises some questions. First, why is the message specifically in Somali? It could be that there is a sizeable Somali community around University Avenue. It could also be that addiction is not a problem widely discussed within the Somali community and My Home Inc. is seeking to foster discussion and encourage treatment. Upon investigation, the reason that the ad is in Somali is because My Home Inc.’s mission of helping the community by helping individuals has a specific target audience. According to their website,

My Home Inc. has developed a culturally specific model of service ... to reduce the rates of relapse, cycles of recidivism and other self-defeating behaviors for Adult African American and East African men who are / have experienced problematic chemical use / abuse issues, as well as community, domestic and family violence due to chemical dependency (<http://myhomeincaati.com/about/>).

The reason for the window display catering to Somali speakers is quite simple: that is the group My Home Inc. seeks to help.



Location: Window display on University Avenue W, between St. Albans Street N and Dale Street N

Translation: *You looking for work? We have positions available in Ham Lake.*

A simple flier in the window of one of the businesses along University Avenue casually asks the question, “Are you looking for work?” in Spanish. In case the audience is, further information is already provided, again in Spanish: “We have positions available in Ham Lake.” Having by far the most casual tone and presentation of any of the signs I photographed on University, this flier is not hard to comprehend, especially when it is analyzed alongside the SPEAKING model.

Its setting is in the window of one of the permanent businesses on University. The participants (audience) are nearby job-seeking Spanish-speakers who are willing to commute to Ham Lake for work. Its end, or goal, is to advertise employment to those searching for a job in a friendly and informal tone. Instrumentalities here are, of course, written, and come in the form of short phrases and basic bits of information, all in Spanish, including the subtle ‘a’ and ‘o’ between the hours of business at each location and addresses. The only exceptions here are the addresses, which are given in English. Just as the norm for fliers with rainbow Word Art would predict, its language is informal and its genre belongs in the realm of community service announcements.



Rondo Community Outreach Library
Location: University Avenue W and Dale Street N



Tiles outside of Rondo Community Outreach Library

Location: University Avenue W and Dale Street N

Serving as vital lifelines for new immigrants, public libraries offer many resources that newcomers may not otherwise find access to. The Rondo Community Outreach Library highlights the languages spoken by its patrons by displaying cement tiles on the sidewalk that have an inspirational quote in both English and the language of a served ethnic group.

Among these tiles are ones that feature Cambodian and English, Spanish and English, and Vietnamese and English. The tile featuring Cambodian reads: “If you study patiently, you will gain knowledge and wisdom. And, if you work diligently and become successfully engaged in your affairs, you will eventually realize your dreams.” The tile featuring Spanish quotes Cesar Chavez: “True wealth is not measured by money, social status or power. It is measured in the legacy we leave for those we love and those who inspire.” Lastly, the Vietnamese on the third tile reads simply: “Descendants of the dragon and celestial deities,” two entities that are fixtures in Vietnamese mythology.

The Cambodian tile stands out as the only representation of the language I encountered along University Avenue. While it stands as a brief mention of the Cambodian language and local ethnic group, perhaps this sole presence is telling of the size of the Cambodian community around the avenue.

Aside from the window flier advertising jobs, the tile featuring Spanish was the only other display of the language I found. Similar to Cambodian, perhaps the sparse representation indicates a shift in the immigrant communities that are establishing roots on and around the avenue.

On a different note, the tile featuring Vietnamese was not the only place the language was displayed. It was however, the only place that offered a deeper insight into Vietnamese culture. Featuring the phrase “Descendants of the dragon and celestial deities” in Vietnamese, the tile not only points to language, but to familial and cultural history as well. In “The Power and Relevance of Vietnamese Myths,” Nguyen Ngoc Binh writes,

Ask any Vietnamese about the origin of his people, and most likely he will tell you that they were born of a dragon and a fairy ("con rong chau tien"). Certainly this is an unscientific explanation...yet the power of that myth is such that no Vietnamese, no matter how much scientific training he has received, would ever deny believing in it at least to a certain extent (par. 1).

A mere four words in Vietnamese conjure a story familiar to nearly all Vietnamese families and to its culture as a whole.

Though it is enlightening to see Cambodian, Spanish, and Vietnamese being represented outside of a resource used by so many groups in the community, it is interesting to note the placement of these tiles on the ground. People trample over these daily just as society—in most cases—looks over these languages in the wider English-only linguistic landscape. The tiles outside of the Rondo Community Outreach Library mirror the connection between languages spoken by immigrant groups and the acceptance of such languages within a predominantly English-only environment.



Islamic Da'wah Center

Location: Near University Avenue W and N Mackubin Street



Wall painting on the side of the Islamic Da'wah Center

Location: Near University Avenue W and N Mackubin Street

Serving as a place for a religious community, the Islamic Da'wah Center negotiates the middle ground between old and new culture. Translating roughly to “to invite,” the Da'wah Center serves to a place where Muslims can invite others to understand Islam through discussion and asking questions.

Since religion tends to be one of the systems of beliefs that doesn't change when one immigrates, this space is similar to the food establishments in the sense that it maintains the old culture; the inclusion of Arabic is not entirely dependent on an immigrant's location. However, the inclusion of English is. Had this wall painting (see the image above) been in another part of the world, English likely would not be featured alongside the Arabic. In this example, Arabic is still written, just with an English translation. Inclusion of both languages strengthens the mission of the center to invite others (English-speakers) to learn more about Islam.

Conclusion

Through researching a small section of University Avenue, it becomes clear that a linguistic landscape is much more indicative of a location and its community members than it often receives credit for. Language is an important aspect of identity, both communal and individual. And if we look close enough, its landscape can tell us more about an environment and the people within the community than we ever thought possible.

Similar to the way language has affected me and in my family, the languages I encountered have forever marked the linguistic landscape of University Avenue. The colors of Tagalog, Vietnamese, Chinese, African languages, Somali, Spanish, Cambodian, and Arabic have transformed an otherwise monochrome, English-only

landscape into an area that is quietly vibrant with other cultures and telling of the universal immigrant experience with language.

In the context of this study, what I found was that English unsurprisingly dominates the linguistic landscape. However, there are little glimmers of diversity seen in restaurants, markets, and community gathering spaces. It is through the stories told through the languages of these immigrant groups that new dimensions of identity can be found, navigated, and learned from.

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