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Revelations of Meanings: Geosemiotic Analysis of the Linguistic Landscape of a Sacred Site in Japan

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Abstract:

This study explores the linguistic landscape of Atsuta Shrine, one of the three principal sites in Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion. Using Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotics framework, it investigates cultural meanings within the shrine's linguistic elements. Going beyond mere text, it also examines semiotic meanings in material forms like torii gates and the shrine's untouched forest, helping to unravel the relationship between space, power, and semiotics. Findings highlight the emphasis on ritual, spirituality, community identity, and historical narratives through symbolic language, varied translations, linguistic omissions, and the interplay of sacredness, mass tourism, and nationalist sentiments.

1 Introduction

Atsuta Shrine (熱田神宮 Atsuta Jingū) is located in the central city of Nagoya, Japan, with a history dating back 2,000 years, housing the Kusanagi no Mitsurugi, a semi-legendary sword, one of the Three Sacred Treasures of the Japanese Imperial Throne. The shrine holds around 60 festivals a year and around 10 important Shinto rituals (Atsuta Shrine 2019). The premises itself is about 190,000m², not counting an additional 90,000m² of associated shrines outside the premises. More than 9 million people visit the site each year for such things as tourism, festivals, New Year, commemorative ceremonies, and weddings (Atsuta Jingu 2009).

Atsuta has not only historically provided for the spiritual needs of the local populace, but has been of national importance for centuries. 宮 *Miya*, another word for "shrine," was the 41st of the *shukuba*, or post stations, on the old Tōkaidō Road, the principal highway connecting the ancient imperial capital of Kyōto and the shogunate capital Edo (modern day Tōkyō) in the Edo Period (1603 – 1867). This was the busiest post station along the route: it was the only open water crossing (a 27km boat ride to the 42nd post station of Kuwana-juku), and a starting point of other primary trade routes crisscrossing Japan. Additionally, it sat just south of Nagoya Castle, one of the most politically powerful centers in the country.

As Atsuta Shrine is one of the most important shrines in Shinto, and host to more than 60 matsuri year where kami are celebrated, the primary purpose of this site is as a living place for worship. According to the shrine's website (Atsuta Jingu 2009), worshipers can make formal visits to Atsuta Shrine to pray for safe childbirth, for first "solid meal" ceremonies (after 100 days), warding off evil spirits (especially at certain "calamitous years", e.g., 37 for women and 42 for men), wedding ceremonies, prayers for academic advancement, job seeking, and blessing new automobiles (the shrine has a drive-in blessing ground for this).

This hallowed ground provides an interesting nexus analysis, as the historical trajectories, the movement of bodies, and long-held practices and artifacts give us the opportunity to explore how sacred spaces are created by histories of practices that have been established since time immemorial. This chapter will introduce the background of the shrine and its observances, and the linguistic landscape of Atsuta Shrine. It will then cover how the analytical tool of geosemiotics was used to conduct the nexus analysis, looking at what languages are (and are not) used in the shrine's semiotic landscape, how language is used, and how this landscape creates a sense of space in the shrine.

This chapter answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the LL of Atsuta Shrine contribute to our understanding of Japanese and global culture?

As a sacred site, I (Ryan, first author)[1] am interested to see what the linguistic landscape tells us about Japanese culture, and, as Atsuta Shrine is a major tourist site, about attitudes toward non-Japanese visitors in this sacred space. Using geosemiotics as a framework, I examine how our understanding of Japanese culture is deepened by studying signage in and around Atsuta Shrine.

RQ2 How does the LL of Atsuta Shrine contribute to our understanding of a sense of "place"?

The place where a social action happens is integral to its meaning (Scollon and Scollon 2003). Space is socially constructed by means of the lived space, or the intersection between conceived and material space, and power relations influence spaces. In signage, text conveys much more than basic information: we must take into account the spatial meaning of where the sign was situated (Wohlwend 2021: 170). As the distribution of language practices forms socio-geographic patterns (Mills 2016), we must analyze aspects of place, and how those meanings and modes arise (Nichols 2014) in space-making through language.

1.1 Background: travel and tourism at the shrine

Due to its importance as a pilgrimage site, its economic links, and strategic ports, the site has been important for travelers since ancient times. More than 9 million people visit the site each year for tourism, festivals, New Year, commemorative ceremonies, and weddings ("Atsuta Shrine" 2019). A large parking lot near the West Gate ushers in charter buses full of tourists from around Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and China. Thousands more come every day through private vehicles and from the adjacent city bus station and stops, two subway

[1] This chapter is excerpted from a doctoral dissertation written by Ryan Barnes (first author), with direction from Karen Wohlwend (second author). This account is written from Ryan's first-person perspective to accurately depict his role as principal researcher and author.

stations, and two major train stations. There is a gift shop and numerous food stalls selling local delicacies, a museum, and well-known restaurants around the neighborhood. Signs in the shrine point to the consumer aspect of tourism, serving the needs and desires of visitors beyond spirituality, such as vending machines, souvenir shops, and kishimen (flat wheat noodle, a local delicacy) stands.

This commercial tradition around tourism is deeply rooted. In the past, the shukuba (post station) of Miya was the 41st station of 53 stops along the main highway, the Tōkaidō Route, that linked the shogunate capital Edo (modern-day Tokyo) to the old imperial capital Kyoto during the Edo Period (1603–1858). This was the busiest shukuba along the route as it was the only sea crossing (a 16 mile boat ride from Miya-juku to the 42nd post station of Kuwana), and at the junction of the Tokaido, Saya Kaido, Kiso Kaido, and Minoji trade routes. Additionally, it sat just south of Nagoya Castle, one of the most politically powerful centers in Japan. Although Atsuta Ward is more of a residential center than a commercial powerhouse these days, there is certainly a tradition of local delicacies and souvenirs that are sought-after.

1.2 The linguistic landscape of Atsuta Shrine

Due to its size, long history, and importance in Japanese culture, the shrine is a rich site for exploring the nexus of language, space, and identity. Its linguistic landscape offers one avenue of inquiry, reflecting the shrine's role as a sacred space, a cultural heritage site, and a tourist destination. The linguistic landscape—essentially publicly displayed language—imply a socially constructed "space," and a certain, defined, and symbolic mediated activity done in that space. The "linguistic" portion originally referred to the languages commonly expressed on signs, and the "landscape" reflects the public space where the language is used: a "space with visible inscription made through deliberate human intervention and meaning making" (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010a: 2), where "inscription" has been expanded

to include a more diverse range of semiotic meanings (e.g., Jaworski and Thurlow 2010b; Pennycook 2018; Stroud and Jegels 2014; Zabrodskaja and Milani 2014): an “authentic, dynamic, public mega-text” that represents “society at a micro-level” (Rowland 2013: 503).

Somewhat surprisingly, rather than semiotics, the study of public “signs” arose in studies of language policy, planning, preservation, and vitality. The seminal study by Landry and Bourhis (1997) served to identify social “boundaries of linguistic territories” (p. 24) and trace implications of language policies in multilingual areas where language use was a contested topic in local politics and societies, such as Belgium (predominantly French and Flemish) and Québec, Canada (predominantly French and English). Visibility and salience (Landry and Bourhis 1997) were starting points for looking at languages in the LL from an ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) perspective. For an outsider, it may not be immediately apparent that there are speakers of a certain language in the area. This may be due to the use of the dominant language in public, or to reticence in communicating in the language around speakers of the dominant language. However, the presence of the non-dominant language in the LL indicates that people with the ability to write in the language, as well the linguistic competence to understand the language, are communicating within this area. As this abundant material of previously overlooked public text (Shohamy 2018) began to be studied in new ways, it brought about a multitude of interpretations by providing new data about sociolinguistics beyond vitality, salience, and visibility (Zabrodskaja and Milani 2014).

The texts and mediational means in the signage displayed in and around Atsuta Shrine give us clues about discourses in place (Scollon and Scollon 2003), such as sacredness (through its importance in the Shinto religion), or national identity (through its connection with the Imperial Family and as an indigenous faith), historical (how this sacredness has been constructed and maintained over the centuries), and current issues (international touristic discourse). By applying nexus analysis, the linguistic landscape of Atsuta Shrine becomes a site where historical trajectories and current practices intersect.

Nexus analysis takes an action-oriented approach to critical discourse analysis that focuses on materials and movement, rather than a turn of talk, a line of print, or an ethnographic event. Everyday actions, particularly those that make up the mundane habits of daily living, are often unaccompanied by text or talk. Nonetheless, these actions are saturated with discourse that has been submerged in familiar practices that have become routine, expected, and unremarkable. The actions one uses with materials are shaped by discourses and histories of practices that underlie our shared expectations (e.g., who may use an object or how it should be used). Such tacit expectations influence what seems possible, affecting future actions with artifacts and potential identities in the cycles that flow into and emanate from a single action. In the simplest terms, the focus is not on what people say but what they do, particularly through taken-for-granted ways of using things that mark people as insiders and outsiders within a community (Wohlwend 2022).

Geosemiotics, introduced in Discourses in Place (Scollon and Scollon 2003), focuses on the ways people make sense of the emplaced images and artifacts within the textual landscape of a place. “A place is constituted not only by the built structures, furniture, and decorative objects but also by the discourses present in that place” (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 162). Geosemiotics draws on Kress’ (2003a) work on multimodality to unpack the cultural embeddedness of signage and other multimodal texts. The meanings people make of the sensory information conveyed by modes such as gaze, color, proximity, or smell depend on the cultural meanings and grammars that created and placed an artifact and the meanings and grammars that users rely on to interpret it. For modal grammars that explain how color or texture convey meaning, geosemiotics draws from Halliday’s (1975) systemic functional linguistics and Kress’ social semiotics (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress and van Leeweun 1996). In this sense, geosemiotics pulls from a European tradition in semiotics, linguistics, and genre theory that studies systems and structures with the intention of

understanding how the design of a sign influences a user's intended purpose (Wohlwend 2022: 9).

2 Theory and background on the linguistic landscape

2.1 Theoretical lens: Geosemiotics

This study will use Scollon and Scollon's (2003) theory of geosemiotics, "the study of the meaning systems by which language is located in the material world" (p. x), "which together form the meanings which we call place" (p. 12). Looking at the material and spatial decisions behind the LL gives us understanding of literacy practices at this sacred site. In the geosemiotic aggregate (see Figure 1, page 7), we can find three main semiotic systems.

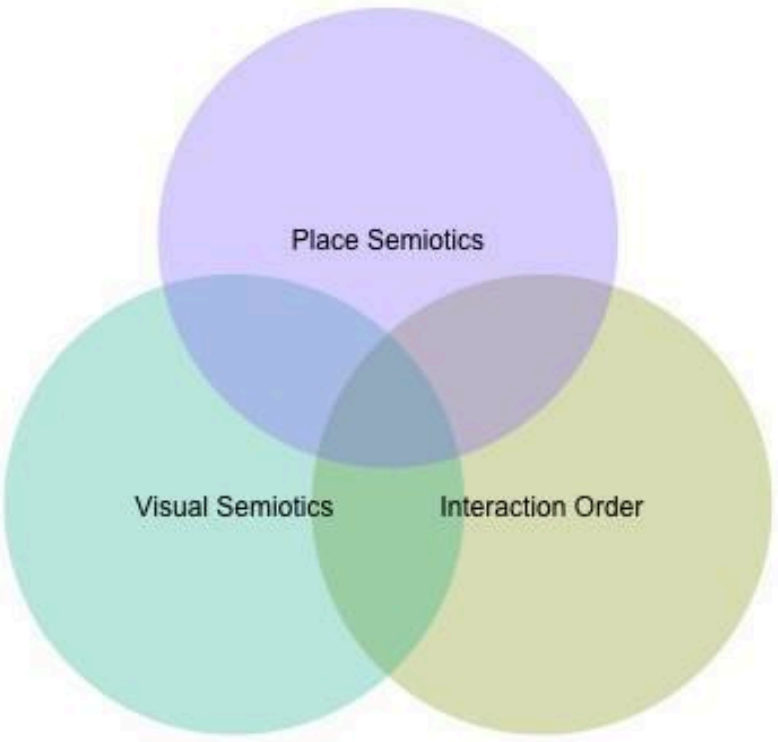

Figure 1: The semiotic components of geosemiotics.

The first component is interaction order (cf. Goffman 1983), the current, ongoing set of social relationships we engage in and strive to uphold with others present around us, which are both ratified and contested, and sometimes denied. The second component consists of visual semiotics, the ways in which pictures—such as signs, images, graphics, texts, photographs, paintings, and various combinations of these elements—are created to be understood as coherent visual messages. The third leg is place semiotics, which refers to the vast collection of semiotic systems that are not confined to individual social actors or the visual artifacts they produce (Scollon and Scollon 2003).

2.2 Interaction order

In interaction order, not only the content of the interaction, but also the physical context, is important. Interactions take place in a social scene, and the sheer presence of bodies in physical space "gives off" (Goffman 1983) meaning. Interaction order includes things such as gaze, posture, physical proximity to one another, and mobility (Goffman 1981). We can move the focus from one body to how multiple bodies interact, and what patterns emerge. Social groupings in aggregate "make up ways of being together that come to be expected in a particular place" (Wohlwend 2021: 50). Hall (1990) lists four elements of interaction order:

1. sense of time
2. perceptual spaces
3. interpersonal distances, and
4. personal fronts.

2.3 Visual Semiotics

The second semiotic system, based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) work, is the interaction order's representation in images and signs, examining how visual images express themselves in modal meanings and cultural representations. Place and meanings expressed in these signs impact bodies as they navigate the cultural space (Scollon and Scollon 2003). Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) list four elements in visual semiotics:

1. represented participants (conceptually or abstractly), as image or spelled out in narration;
2. modality, the accuracy or truth of the representation;
3. composition, the layout of the sign; and
4. interactive participants, how the represented people or actions are related to the producer, viewer, and each other.

The above elements collectively influence how viewers interpret and engage with visual content. Understanding these components gives us the toolkit for analyzing how visual elements convey meaning and elicit responses from audiences.

2.4 Place Semiotics

The place where a social action happens is also integral to its meaning (Scollon and Scollon 2003). Space is socially constructed by means of the lived space, or the intersection between conceived and material space. Power relations influence spaces. In materialized discourse (Blommaert 2013), Sebba (2010) discusses two types of space: *unregulated spaces*, where the language policy of the space is not defined, and *contested spaces* where policy mandates which official language can be used on signs, or what is regarded in the literature

(e.g., Backhaus 2007; Ben-Rafael 2008; Blackwood et al. 2016; Coronel-Molina 2015; Malinowski 2018) as top/down-bottom/up approaches.

All signs index something, and place semiotics examines four elements:

1. emplacement, the affordances and limitations of the placement of the sign in a space;
2. inscription, the presentation of the sign in font, color, material, change of state;
3. code preference, the order in which multiple languages are displayed; and
4. discourses in time and space or "semiotic aggregates" (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 167), "the multiple semiotic systems in a dialogical interaction with each other (2003: 12), the various public discourses going in one place at a certain time, creating "interdiscursive dialogicality" (Al Zydjaly 2014: 72), distinguishing between centrifugal (circulating inwards) and centripetal (circulated outwards) forces.

The above elements demonstrate how signs within a space work together to create meaning and influence the interaction of discourses and bring out broader social and cultural dynamics at play.

Applying geosemiotics within a nexus analysis framework reveals how the sacred site's linguistic landscape operates as a dynamic intersection of social practices, visual messages, and spatial organization. Together, these semiotic systems both decode the layered meanings embedded in the site's signage, and also bring to light the negotiation between tradition and modernity. This approach deepens our understanding of how sacred spaces are both actively shaped by and shape the interplay of language, power, and society.

2.5 Nexus analysis in the LL

Scollon and Scollon (2004) refer to the ethnographic, historical, and methodological arm of these mediated discourses as nexus analysis, focusing on links between discourse and action and their effects in complex social situations (Scollon and de Saint-Georges 2014), and traces an action's histories and global connections outwards that cycle into a moment of activity (Wohlwend 2021). The focus is on social action (Scollon and Scollon 2004), micro-level in contrast to macro-level discourses (Lane 2010). The approach operates inductively, from a research question to a conclusion.

A variety of LL studies (e.g., Kasanga 2014, 2019; Lamb and Sharma 2021; Lou, 2010a, 2010b; Pietikäinen et al. 2011), have made connections with nexus analysis. This allows us to more thoroughly connect observable textual traces in the LL to situated semiotic practices, offering deeper insights into the interconnections between language, power, and society (Malinowski 2018).

For example, in Lou's (2010a) investigation of the transformation of Chinatown, Washington, DC into a tourist destination, she first places herself in the nexus of practice, and asks "What's the story?" (p. 632), navigates it by investigating "Who tells the story?" (p. 637), and looks to change the nexus of practice by critically inquiring "Where is the story?" (p. 640). By decoding the messages implicit in a billboard advertisement, she was able to trace discourses through space and time, and critically engage with attitudes of "ownership" of Chinatown and agency with its erstwhile inhabitants as land values in the area rose and the original community moved out. This approach highlights the importance of positioning oneself within the nexus of practice, using critical questions to unpack complex discursive shifts and their social, cultural, and spatial implications, bringing a deeper understanding of how place-based narratives evolve and reflect broader power dynamics.

3 Data and method

Data at Atsuta Shrine was publicly available. The site was near my former workplace, easily accessible on foot, free to all and open 24 hours a day. Some places in the shrine are off limits to all but the highest priests and the imperial family, and other places prohibit photography. Some places are closed to the general public, such as the Shinto seminary or wedding halls, as well as the extensive urban forest that surrounds the buildings and paths. All photos I took were in places where photography was permitted. I took care to obscure any names of individuals (e.g., on the *ema*, i.e., prayer boards).

For the majority of the study, I photographed the signage in and around the shrine using a Canon PowerShot G1X Mark III. In addition to cataloging the appearance and content of text on signs, I also documented the materials used in making signs and the spaces they are in Stroud and Mpendukana (2009), a shift from static representations to accounting for the meaning of signs' presence in physical space (Scollon and Scollon 2003), their mobility through space and modalities (Reh 2004), and looking at how people and signs interface (Trumper-Hecht 2010). Based on my experience having lived in Japan and China, and using Mandarin Chinese and Japanese in daily life for nearly 20 years, while yet acknowledging my position as an outsider in both cultures, I sought to gain a deeper meaning of what the signs were expressing.

As I combed and sorted through the photos, I inductively began considering the area in its aggregate. My guiding questions were: How do these signs connect to the big picture to create a sense of place? Taking their spatiality and materiality into account, what messages do the signs have beyond their literal textual content? I translated the Chinese and Japanese signage into English, checking the translations with a native speaker of each respective language. As for the Thai message, I used Google Translate, and confirmed the translation with a Thai native speaker.

In geosemiotics, “aspects of place must be analyzed in terms of the meanings and modes of participation that they make available” (Nichols 2014: 179). Scollon and Scollon (2003) examine three layers of meaning in analysis: semiotics of place (how both the built and natural environment produce meanings), texts, and material objects in space. As for locating these signs in the physical environment, I followed Nichols’ et al. (2012) discussion of having the researcher examine his or her own interaction with space, and to reference perceptual space and activities in space. Photos were taken of signage that seemed to have rich multimodality in placed meanings. Starting with an appropriate site of engagement, work was done to select photos with a variety of multimodal meanings. I selected signage where text conveyed much more than basic information, using “visual semiotics to deconstruct interactions among modes and ways of reading images,” taking into account the spatial meaning of where the sign was situated (Wohlwend 2021: 170).

The shrine’s signs have an indexicality, pointing to not only textual meaning, but an assemblage of time, place, and space, in direct relation to the real world. An important aspect to consider in multilingual signage is code preference. Code preference, “the relationship between two or more languages in bilingual (multilingual) signs and pictures” (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 209), looks at what is displayed more prominently, e.g., a bigger font face or brighter colors. The code preference of signage gives us clues on dominant discourses and languages in the public sphere.

My analysis of the linguistic landscape at Atsuta Shrine focused on the impact of the surrounding area on the signage, and the meanings made as people navigate through the shrine. The signage is influenced not just by religious meanings, but also to help visitors who come for touristic purposes navigate the site. The surroundings of one of the holiest places in the Shinto religion and the perceived purity of the so-called liturgical language, i.e., Japanese, creates some tension with the needs of those who may not necessarily be able to understand Japanese. Taking into account not only the content of the signs, but their place

in the physical world, give us some valuable information about how people and ideas circulate through the space.

4 Geosemiotic analysis of language choice in a museum sign

An important factor to unpack in depth in a geosemiotic analysis of a LL is language choice. Analysis of language choice includes analysis of for whom a text is intended for, and who is excluded, e.g., what information is not available to readers who don't know Japanese, and why that might be. Signs address certain audiences, and exclude those who do not have the cultural or linguistic skills to decipher meanings (Gorter 2006).

Assessing what information is unavailable to readers who do not know Japanese can shed light on the power dynamics and cultural assumptions embedded in the space. This selective communication serves as a gatekeeping mechanism within the linguistic landscape, shaping both the accessibility of information and the interpretation of meaning.

In terms of Atsuta, there is a sign at the Hall of Treasures which discusses the charging of a nominal admission. A sign on the door (Figure 2, page 15), prominently displayed words in Chinese, rather than Japanese. Pictured are two signs at the entrance discussing the charging of a nominal admission fee. The larger, simpler, sign on the bottom prominently displays words in Chinese (see Table 1 below for the translation), and not Japanese.

Table 1

A bilingual Chinese/Japanese sign in the Atsuta Jingū Museum window.

Message in Simplified Chinese	English Translation
这个设施收费请在柜	This facility charges admission.
台买门票	Please buy a ticket at the counter.

Message in Japanese	English Translation
この施設は有料です。 中のカウンターにて 拝観券をお求めください。 このご案内は中国の方向けのご案内です	This facility charges admission. [Polite speech] Please purchase an admission ticket [Formal speech] at the counter inside. [Honorific speech] This message is intended for Chinese people. [Humble speech]

Figure 2

A sign at the Atsuta museum in Japanese and Simplified Chinese.

This text was repeated in Japanese (the small text above the Chinese, see Table 1, page 11 for the translation). In the very bottom right hand corner, in even smaller text, the words function like fine print: “This message is intended for Chinese people.” Although the Japanese text is couched in polite speech, the spatial placement of this message in such a direct fashion, and the accompanying note of apology indicate some cultural

misunderstandings and tensions that exist in this shrine. The juxtaposition of the discreet fine-print message with the explicit nature of the Chinese message indicates some etiquette has perhaps been breached, signaling what inappropriate behavior will not be tolerated and by whom. The additional lack of English on the bottom sign conceals, masks, or excludes this conflict from English speakers.

4.1 Interaction Order of the museum sign

Honne and *tatemae* are important concepts in Japanese culture that express how people are expected to interact. The former refers to public-facing behaviors, which emphasize harmony and respect, while the latter refers to one's true feelings, which are often hidden or communicated privately. It seems like the hidden, apologetic message in Japanese indexes tatemae by explaining the reason for this stern directness, but the fee-charging message in Chinese is referencing another discourse. Although both languages use Chinese characters, I would argue that the Japanese is hidden in plain sight, and is written in an obscure way to become unintelligible to Chinese readers. Similarly, the Chinese language message's different appearance and arrangement of the Simplified Chinese Characters may render it at least partially unintelligible to casual Japanese readers. This masking aligns with tatemae and softens the direct reaction to an awkward social scene, where misunderstandings have apparently taken place.

In order to curtail further linguistic and cultural misunderstandings, this sign has been put at eye-level at the door, arguably more obvious than the sign of chief importance: the original one hung above this, written in Japanese and English, giving the name and function of the place and how much it costs to enter.

4.2 Visual Semiotics: Code Preference in the museum sign

In the case of the sign in Simplified Chinese and Japanese, the Chinese text has a much larger font but yet remains below the Japanese text. The materiality of the sign contrasts

with the stylistic decisions in the upper Japanese/English sign: a multiplicity of colors and font faces (bold, italics) and a grid pattern expressing information that is not given in the Chinese one, perhaps making an implicit assumption that since Chinese people can read Chinese characters, they can read the Sino-Japanese ones and figure it out for themselves. The simple design also seems rushed, perhaps in reaction to repeated undesirable behaviors.

4.3 Discourses in Place: Emplacement of the museum sign

The way in which a sign is displayed indicates a certain level of congruence with the dominant culture. Scollon and Scollon (2003) discuss “transgressive emplacement,” where signs are placed “wrongly,” according to the reader and her or his community. A sign like this would probably not be seen in China, as there would be more cultural tools available to mitigate misunderstandings of a non-free site in an otherwise free space, for example, a sign toward the ticket counter guiding, rather than admonishing. This sign seems to be incongruent with Japanese culture as well, as the need for an apology in fine print Japanese attests. This gives evidence of tension between the dominant culture who knows the rules, and the tourist subculture who must be told the rules of the space.

This mixed message demonstrates the delicate balance of dynamics in cultural communication within public spaces. The presence of the fine print apology in Japanese suggests an attempt to balance the directness required for local tourists with the indirect, polite norms of Japanese culture. The sign serves as a mediated point of interaction between the local cultural expectations and the practical needs of guiding international visitors, bringing out the broader tension between maintaining cultural integrity, local customs, and accommodating global tourism.

5 Nexus analysis of historical trajectories of discourse: Haiku poems at the shrine

A sign discussing three *haiku* poems[2] written about the premises by the great haikuist Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) (Figure 3, page 18) details the locations of stone inscriptions in the area. One poem, whose inscription is installed at the adjacent Myōanji Temple, remarks on Bashō's arrival at Atsuta after a long journey from Ise:

Into this sea / I'll throw away my straw sandals / Cold shower on my hat!

These signs give us evidence of historical trajectories of the area by documenting travel patterns and activities throughout the shrine's long history.

Figure 3

[2] A haiku is a short Japanese poem that typically has 17 syllables in three lines, with five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third and contains a seasonal element (Adiss, 2022).

The haiku poet Bashō was a frequent visitor to Atsuta. This sign commemorates some haiku he wrote about the area, and indexes locations of stone inscriptions of his haiku (indexes themselves).

Another sign of meanings expressed in a high-context discourse can be found in the orientation of the text itself. Japanese was historically written top-to-bottom and right-to-left, but nowadays, signage often follows a left-to-right, top-to-bottom flow. The more modern, left-to-right writing orientation was usually associated with information, e.g., providing a quick overview, telling where to go, what to do (or not do) in a modern-day discourse. Signs related to modern technology (taking pictures), directions to modern conveniences (public restrooms), and admission fees are written left-to-right. The language is usually straightforward and direct.

As for the more traditional top-to-bottom orientation, the discourse is more timeless or appeals to traditions rooted deep in history. These include prayers, instructions on ritual ablutions, or respect for the emperor. The language in these signs often takes a high-context e.g., “taking fish, birds, trees, and stones.” I argue that many of the implications would need a high degree of cultural knowledge for a social actor to interact with, even with a degree of language skills. As some signs are stone inscriptions from hundreds of years ago, enduring spiritual practices can be seen in the historical trajectories.

6 Discourses in place in the linguistic landscape

6.1 Sign placement and authority discourse

Signs publicly placed in Japan often carry a visible mark of the authority who placed it. To justify its placement, the authority taking responsibility will be printed in the bottom right-hand corner (or bottom left if the text is written top-to-bottom, right-to-left, another common orientation for Japanese script)—the modality of the sign showing the “sign-off” at

the margin. In my case, by reading through the messages on the signs, I found such responsible organizations and civically-minded businesses as the Atsuta Shrine Authority, Nagoya City Greenery Division, and sponsors (Nagoya Atsuta Chapter of the Lions Club, Atsuta Prefectural Hi-no-Maru [Japanese Flag] Society). The only names of individuals I found were barely visible on one sign: the calligrapher of the plaque, the master caster's eponymous company, and the chapter president of the Hi-no-Maru Society in Figure 4, page 20 at the bottom center, and right, respectively. This way of addressing a collective instead of individuals might be due to Japan's being a collectivist society, where identities are often focused on the group rather than the individual.

Figure 4

Banzai (may he live 10,000 years). In celebration of His Imperial Majesty's 60 years on the Chrysanthemum Throne. In memorial of the 25th anniversary of the founding

of the Aichi Prefectural Hi-no-Maru (Japanese Flag) Society, a right-wing association. November 3 1986.

Other signs did not indicate authority, but I would argue that many are self-evident as to who put it there. For example, the hempen rope 注連縄 shimenawa surrounding the thousand year-old camphor tree (*Cinnamomum camphora*) in Figure 5, page 21, festooned with 紙垂 shide zigzag-shaped paper streamers, can only be created with special skills, knowledge, and materials that are not widely available. Being placed on a small platform surrounded by a low stone wall, behind a wooden fence, this rope marks the transition between the sacred and profane worlds, and reserves this space for deities (discourses in place). The authority who created this had to have special access as well as skills to place this "sign", which would be under the purview of Atsuta Shrine.

Figure 5

At a giant camphor tree, a man is posing for his two colleagues, just out of the photo.

Some ways that authority regulates behavior is by instructing, (e.g, Figure 2, page 15), informing (e.g., Figure 3, page 18), prohibiting, and guiding (e.g., Figure 6, page 22). Although there are security guards around the premises, much of the information about how to behave and what to do are written out and expected to be followed, or is implicitly understood in the high-context culture.

6.2 Converging discourses of religion and nation

Beyond personal prayers, the shrine also offers up prayers for business, the nation, and for celebrating life itself. In honoring the Emperor's reign with a flagpole (Figure 4, page 20), and marking a 1,000 year-old tree as sacred (Figure 5, page 21), much of Shinto has to do with celebrating and honoring nature and tradition through ceremony. The linguistic landscape reflected the celebration of life, through flourishing plants (e.g., detailing important plants in the first part of the information sign in Figure 5, page 21), and how prayers were granted for academic and business success.

Figure 6

Top to bottom, left to right: Betsugū, Hakkengū • Kamichima Jinja [major shrines contained in Atsuta]; Bunka Den • Hōmotsukan (Culture Palace • Treasure House); o-tearai (restrooms); Hongū • Kaguraden (Sanctuary • Sacred Dance Hall). The text is in Japanese with the hiragana ruby characters written below as annotated glosses to facilitate unfamiliar readings of the Sino-Japanese logographic characters—note that the sign for restrooms was deemed familiar enough not to necessitate any ruby annotations.

The flagpole (Figure 4, page 20) area is geosemiotically interesting. The flagpole is the tallest structure in the shrine, but is outside the main worshiping area, and in an adjacent park that is still part of the shrine premises. From the worshiping area (place semiotics), the flagpole is not visible, seeming to suggest tensions in spiritual and patriotic discourses, although Shinto has deep roots in both. As for the visual semiotics, the multicolored flag stands out not only in terms of its contrast, but also textually—there was some significant work in casting the bronze plaque and raising the lettering and image. From an interaction order, the raising and lowering of the flag, and the positioning of the sign at a point that pulls the viewer to the Rising Sun flag taps into some discourses of patriotism and devotion to the Emperor and country.

6.3 Lack of Signage

It is also important to take into account the lack of elements or design. One way of looking at this is through silence. Silence can be the willful suppression of a language, or internalizing the message in the culture to a sufficient degree that an overt display is not necessary. The environmental semiotics of silence (Jaworski 2018) plays a part in the landscape, as Japanese society in general and in Shinto ceremonies in particular place an

emphasis on the role of silence. Much of what happens in the Shinto religion happens in non-linguistic contexts as many rites and ceremonies are nonverbal (Richardson 2020). This means that much of the semiotic meaning is conveyed beyond language.

Silence can be the willful suppression of a language, or internalizing the message in the culture to a sufficient degree that an overt display is not necessary. As described in Figure 7, page 24, the lack of inscription at the entrance of the shrine is made up for with a massive gate (i.e., a *torii*), which conveys meaning to the visitor about what this place is, and what is going on here. In this case, it is a crossing into the shrine from the mundane to the sacred. To enter, the performance of the silent bow also gives off meaning to show respect for the site and for the deities contained within.

Figure 7

The Southern torii (gate) at Atsuta. Shinto shrines are usually bounded by a fence to ward off impurities and cleave the sacred space, and are entered through a two-post gateway with a crossbeam or two at the top called a torii.

6.4 Cultural histories

As Scollon and Scollon (2003) emphasize, in addition to responding to the LL, social actors use textual discourse to shape it, and bring their own cultural histories in shaping it. In the case of Atsuta, a designated portion of the LL is generated not by the shrine's authorities, but by visitors themselves. This gives space to multilingual contexts in the form of prayers, where visitors are free to communicate with the deities in their preferred language. In this space (Figure 8, below), prayers in foreign languages are displayed equally alongside Japanese prayers.

Figure 8

絵馬 *ema* (prayer boards). Although most visible prayers are written in Japanese, the circled one is written in Thai. It says, "I wish that this year I'll be rich. For the business to be smooth. For happiness. For good health."

To understand the mediational tools of the LL, it is necessary to look at both one's own habitus as well as the cultural histories of the means. Blommaert (2013: 43) looks at "demarcation," a major function of public signs, where signs "cut up a larger space into smaller ones, into micro-spaces where particular rules and codes operate in relation to specific audiences." As described in the placement of the torii (gate) above (Figure 7, page 24), has a historical dimension that on one side demarcates the sacred space and on the other side the banal (cf. Alsaif and Starks 2021). The meaning of the place is conveyed, but without needing to give the place name, as its magnificence makes itself understood.

7 Conclusion and discussion

This chapter explored the intersection of geosemiotics and nexus analysis to examine the linguistic landscape (LL) of a sacred space, demonstrating how the integration of these frameworks provides a multifaceted lens for understanding the sociocultural and historical dynamics of place. While geosemiotics emphasizes the material and spatial dimensions of language in public spaces, nexus analysis enriches this perspective by foregrounding the dynamic interplay of historical trajectories, discourses, and social action. By applying these frameworks to the multilingual and multimodal LL of Atsuta Shrine, this study has examined how sacred spaces function where tradition, globalization, and social interaction intersect.

Through an analysis of selected signs, this chapter highlighted key themes such as authority, cultural histories, and the tensions between tourism and spiritual purpose. The findings demonstrate how the LL of sacred spaces not only contains but also mediates broader discourses of identity, power, and cultural heritage. Furthermore, this chapter has demonstrated the value of employing nexus analysis to capture the dynamic processes through which signs and spaces are filled with meaning, offering a deeper understanding of how linguistic landscapes shape, and are shaped by, the communities.

Future research could build on this study by further exploring the methodological challenges of integrating geosemiotics and nexus analysis, particularly in contexts where access to sacred spaces is restricted or culturally sensitive. Other directions may include investigating where competing discourses such as commercialism and spiritually come into conflict. This study has examined the potential of combining geosemiotics and nexus analysis to bring out how the linguistic landscapes mediate social meaning. By focusing on how text, space, and action work together to create a sacred space, this approach gives us a better understanding of how sacred spaces play a role in contemporary Japanese society.

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