

## Survey on Multilingual Signs from Japan's Linguistic Landscape: Non-Japanese Viewpoints

*Japan's process of internationalization, as the increasing number of foreign residents and tourists shows, seems to be proceeding at an extraordinary speed. Within the process, Japanese authorities and citizens have to face many different types of problems: one of them is sociolinguistic. This paper presents the results of a survey conducted among non-Japanese native speakers concerning the quality of Japan's linguistic landscape. Participants were asked to evaluate public and private multilingual signs. After the evaluation part, they were requested to answer three open questions to briefly explicate what they consider problematic of such signs. From the survey it was possible to observe a general disappointment, mainly at a linguistic level, due to the high number of "wrong" texts of both public and private domains. Although Japan is indeed going through a rapid internationalization, the results showed that on the whole, people from Western countries, or cultures, tended to point out the most problems; Eastern people seem to be more tolerant and do not tend to consider wrong signs something that might interfere with a country's attempt to present an international face to the world.*

**Keywords:** Japan, Linguistic Landscape, Public signs, Private signs, Idiosyncrasies

### Japan's Internationalization Process

In recent years, Japan has seen an unprecedented increase in the presence of foreigners. This social phenomenon is certainly due mainly to the official selection of the nation's capital city as the main site of the 2020 Summer Olympic Games<sup>1</sup>. In fact, starting in 2013, the year that Tokyo officially won its bid to host the Games, the Japanese authorities began a rapid process of internationalizing the country, mainly focused on boosting the influx of foreigners. To appreciate the resulting exponential growth, it should suffice to cite the data concerning the upsurges in both foreign residents and overseas

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<sup>1</sup>Due to the world-wide outbreak of the COVID-19 that started in the first months of 2020, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March the authorities decided to postpone the Games to the summer of 2021.

1 tourists. Residents have increased by approximately 800,000 individuals,  
2 reaching almost three million; tourists, however, have more than doubled,  
3 surpassing 31 million entries per year.<sup>2</sup>

4 This undeniable growth in foreigners' presence in Japan has brought to the  
5 fore several linguistic issues, among which the country's linguistic landscape  
6 certainly plays an important part. This upswing, mostly of non-Japanese  
7 speakers, has in fact forced both authorities and private entities to produce  
8 more and more multilingual signs, billboards, posters or menus. It is from this  
9 perspective that Japan's multilingualism should be analyzed: While it is true  
10 that, concerning its orality, Japan might easily be defined *de facto* as a  
11 monolingual country (without considering the local variations of the Japanese  
12 language), for the domain of "visible languages" the same assertion should not  
13 be made. However, it is in this, one might say, almost overwhelming visible  
14 multilingualism, that many kinds of linguistic interferences occur, often giving  
15 the sensation of incongruity and strangeness. This aspect should not be  
16 underestimated, as it might result in an obstacle to the achievement of a  
17 multilingual society that Japan is aiming towards.

18 This paper shows the results of a survey conducted among both foreign  
19 residents and tourists, considering their opinions on multilingual signage for  
20 both official and private texts, signage that they could observe during their stay,  
21 or during their daily lives, in the country. The results of the survey provide  
22 answers that address the uncertainties concerning the main question of the  
23 research: Is Japan correctly proceeding towards a sustainable and  
24 well-developed multilingual society?

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<sup>2</sup>Based on the data furnished by the *E-stat portal site of official statistics of Japan* and by the *Japan National Tourism Organization*

## 1 Literature Review and the Context of Linguistic Landscapes

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3 Following the definition given by Landry and Bourhis (1997), the  
4 linguistic landscape is often defined as the language of public road signs,  
5 advertising billboards, street names, places names, commercial shop signs, and  
6 public signs on government buildings of a given territory, region or urban  
7 agglomeration. In these terms, then, several classifications of such signage  
8 have been proposed. Among them, it is necessary to quote the “bottom-up” and  
9 “top-down” ones, elaborated by Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) as well as the  
10 “municipal” and “commercial” classifications, proposed by Scollon and  
11 Scollon (2003). Fundamentally, the main difference of the two classification  
12 methods consists in the terminology: while “bottom-up” or “commercial”  
13 stands for signs posted by private people, like the owners of commercial  
14 enterprises; “top-down” or “municipal” identifies all those signs produced by  
15 governments or similar authorities. This distinction is crucial, especially when  
16 dealing with sociolinguistic matters, such as the visibility of a certain language  
17 under a multilingual perspective. This is particularly true for what concerns  
18 Japan: If one just relies on a superficial analysis of the language visible in the  
19 urban public space, it might result in the impression of Japan pursuing a fully  
20 developed multilingual society, with a considerable variety of foreign  
21 languages mainly for what concerns the private sphere. In the same way, the  
22 official sphere of multilingual signs—including mainly English, Chinese and  
23 Korean—is continually expanding, concentrating above all in the metropolitan  
24 areas.

25 In the last decades, the linguistic landscape of Japan has been at the center  
26 of several studies. Those dealing with multiple themes, such as the economic  
27 aspect in Inoue (2000, 2009), analyze multilingual signage in the context of a  
28 “language market” and categorize them in “intellectual” and “emotional”  
29 terms<sup>1</sup>. The former refers to signs whose purpose is the transmission of certain  
30 linguistic information; the latter categorizes all those signs where, rather than a  
31 proper communicative scope, the semiotic value of languages is predominant.  
32 Again, this is from a different perspective on multilingualism focusing on the  
33 internationalization of the country, the usage of autochthonous characters is  
34 mixed with foreign ones in the signs of Tokyo as in Backhaus (2004, 2007,  
35 2011), McGregor (2003), or in the metropolis’s underground stations (Satojima

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<sup>1</sup>The Japanese terminology is 知的 and 情的

*et al.* 2009). Another point of view is represented by the research of multilingual signage testifying to the presence of linguistic minorities such as the Korean (Kim, 2009) and the South-American ones (Terao, 2009; Long and Imamura, 2012). Shoji (2009) categorizes the multilingual signage of Japan, focusing on the producers as follows:

- Signs produced by foreigners (community):
  - a) Shops, Business
  - b) Community
- Signs produced by the host society (Japan):
  - a) Shops, Business, Transport facilities
  - b) Administration
  - c) Non-governmental residents' organizations
  - d) Residents

This paper examines signs from the second category, wherein the subdivisions of Shoji are included, both public (transport facilities, or administration) and private (shops or business) signs. Starting from the assumption that these signs are a form of “linguistic service<sup>1</sup>” (see Kawahara, 2004; Fujii, 2005), in most cases produced by the host community, it seems appropriate to consider their appraisal degree through the eyes of visitors. As Shohamy and Gorter (2009: 3) state, it is via this sociolinguistic approach, of examination of language in public spaces, that it will be possible to provide information about multilingualism. In particular for Japan, this process might produce the most effective result, mainly because of the high number of linguistic interferences (idiosyncrasies) that are still visible everywhere in the country, both in the private and public domain.

On the issue of idiosyncrasies, a fully developed scientific literature still does not exist. Apart from the numerous articles in online journals and other web pages that are in most cases aimed at a mere mocking of the “wrong” signs seen in Japan, as well as in other Asian countries, past researches did not particularly focus on this topic. Backhaus (2007: 116-121) mentions briefly this problem, stating also that the existence of idiosyncrasies should not be

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<sup>1</sup>The transmission of information reputedly necessary for foreigners in their own languages (Kawahara, 2004: 6)

ignored, as they constitute an integral part of the signs. It has been ascertained that idiosyncrasies, or linguistic interferences, mainly occur at the graphemic, phonemic and morphosyntactic level. Differently from Backhaus, Hyde (2002) and Barrs (2015) assume a more critical attitude towards what they deliberately define as “errors”, pointing out the risk those might represent for the country, in educational and image terms. Their positions and the (previously mentioned) abundant “mockery” popular literature, in a sense, denote quite clearly the possible existence of such feelings among the foreign population freshly arriving, or living long-term, in Japan.

On this particular topic, then, it is also possible to observe the results of the not so many surveys published by Japanese authorities, asking foreigners for their opinions, where the linguistic aspect of signs is astonishingly almost ignored in the final “to-improve list”.

### **Methodology of the Survey**

The survey for this research was conducted online, during March and April 2020, using the platform Google Forms. The target of the questionnaire were non-Japanese native speakers, either residents or with at least one touristic experience in Japan. As there were no direct interactions with the participants, it was necessary to structure the question in the most direct and unambiguous way; thus, the survey was subdivided into two main blocks, the evaluation part and the open questions one, added to the information concerning personal information. The questions were submitted to the participants structured as follows.

- Country
- Resident or tourist
- Evaluation section:
  - Evaluate the following aspects of PUBLIC SIGNS (touristic information, signs at bus stops or stations, prohibition signs, etc.)
  - Linguistic correctness (if the language is grammatically correct)
  - Information quality (if the information is easily understandable)
  - Impression (if they are easily visible and readable)

• Evaluate the following aspects of PRIVATE SIGNS (hotels, shops, restaurants' names, menus, product names, etc.)

-Linguistic correctness (if the language is grammatically correct)

-Information quality (if their meaning is easily understandable)

-Impression (if they remind you of the atmosphere of a certain foreign country)

· Open question section:

1) What do you think about the huge number of signs and posters that can be seen in Japan?

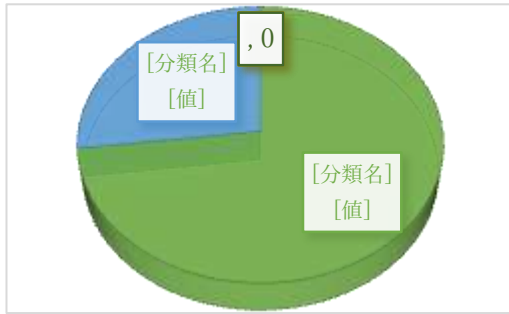
2) What do you think about the use of foreign languages in many of the names of shops, restaurants and facilities?

3) Do you think some aspects of those signs might be refined? If yes, explain briefly why.

In the evaluation section, for each point was submitted an evaluation scale going from the lowest value 1 to the highest 5. For instance, concerning the evaluation of the “linguistic correctness”, the participant should have chosen one score between 1 (not correct), 2 (slightly incorrect), 3 (moderately correct), 4 (mainly correct) or 5 (correct).

## Results and Considerations

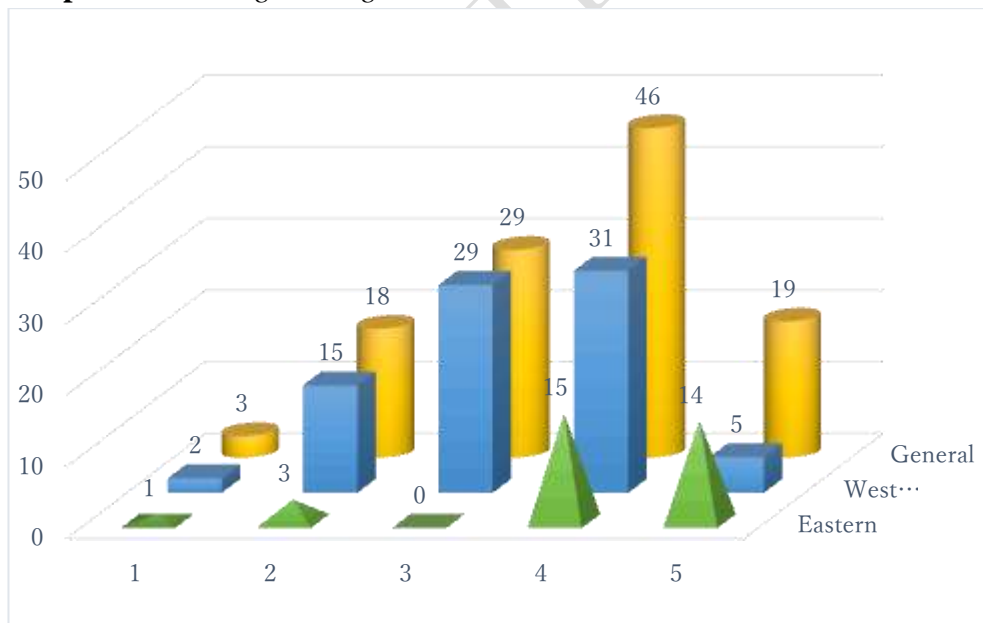
In total, it was possible to collect 115 online respondents to the questionnaire, 65 being residents, 50 being tourists. In order to extrapolate a possible tendency in the opinions about multilingual signage, it was decided to create two main categories of participants, subdividing them in participants from the “Western world” and the “Eastern world”. Inside “Western world” are included people from Europe, the American continent and Australia. By contrast, for “Eastern world” are intended people from Asia. There were no African participants.



The main reason behind the classifications lies in the fact that people from Western countries, as already proved by previous literature, are less habituated to the high-exposure of signage in the urban space; in this sense, the criterion adopted here might be useful to individuate possible socio-cultural differences in the different visual perceptions of signs.

## Statistical Evaluation Results

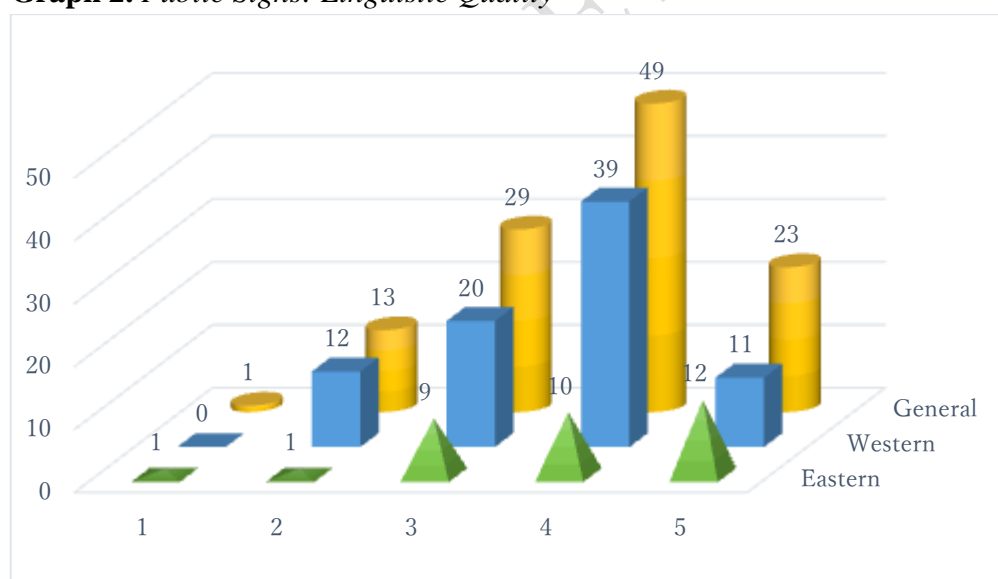
**Graph 1. Public Signs: Linguistic Correctness**



The graph shows the general count (yellow label), and the count for, respectively, the Western (blue label) and the Eastern (green label) worlds. For what concerns the general evaluation, it can be said that with 46 votes (40%), the score of 4 stands out, giving the impression of a good reception of the

1 linguistic correctness of the public signs among foreigners. However, while  
 2 being numerically less than the Western, the evaluations made by Eastern  
 3 people (mainly from China and south-east areas) tend to high scores with most  
 4 of the 29 votes (88% of the total) divided between the highest two values. By  
 5 contrast, the Western world judges the correctness of the signs one rank down,  
 6 with the majority of the votes spread between 4 (37%) and 3 (35%). Still, the  
 7 presence of harsh votes, mainly among Westerners, should not be ignored. This  
 8 consistent difference in the scores between the two worlds might be due to  
 9 different reasons. One could argue, for instance, that there is a difference  
 10 between the correctness of each language representation: while for English,  
 11 and in other rare cases other European languages, errors, mistypes or  
 12 mistranslations often occur, for Chinese, Korean or Thai the same phenomenon  
 13 occurs with a lower frequency (or not at all), not significantly affecting the  
 14 impressions of native speakers. This reflects in the different score average, 4.2  
 15 for the Eastern and 3.3 for the Western world.

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17 **Graph 2. Public Signs: Linguistic Quality**

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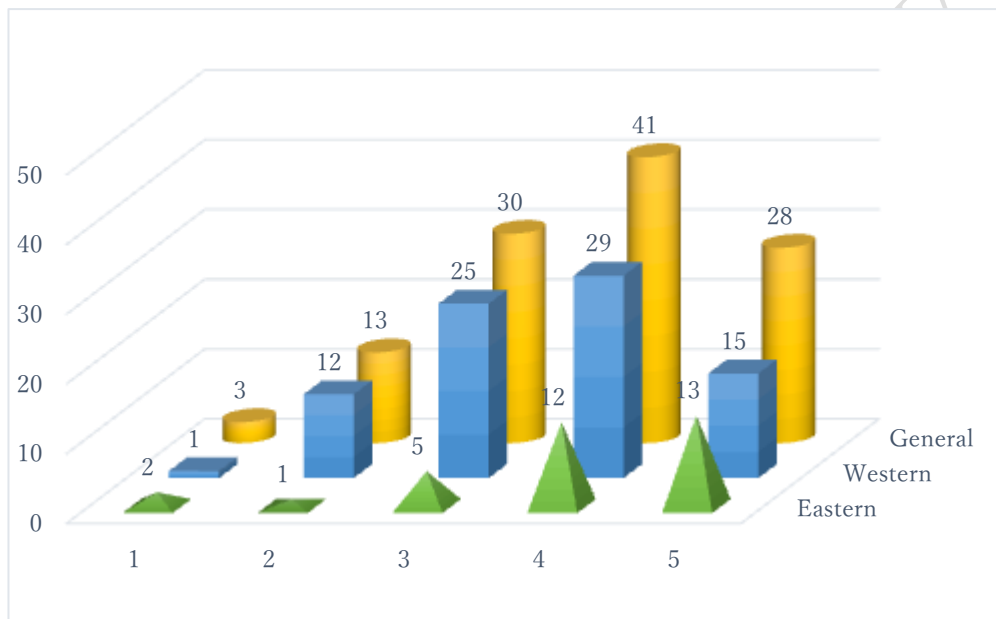
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20 Concerning the quality of the information, meaning the comprehension  
 21 degree and whether necessary information is sufficiently provided, the situation  
 22 is generally similar to the previous one. While, in the general count, 40% of the  
 23 votes denote a high degree of satisfaction, once again a slight discrepancy in  
 24 the perception between the two worlds is confirmed. Although representing the  
 25 minority, for 39% of Westerns, the quality score is collocated between 2 and 3.

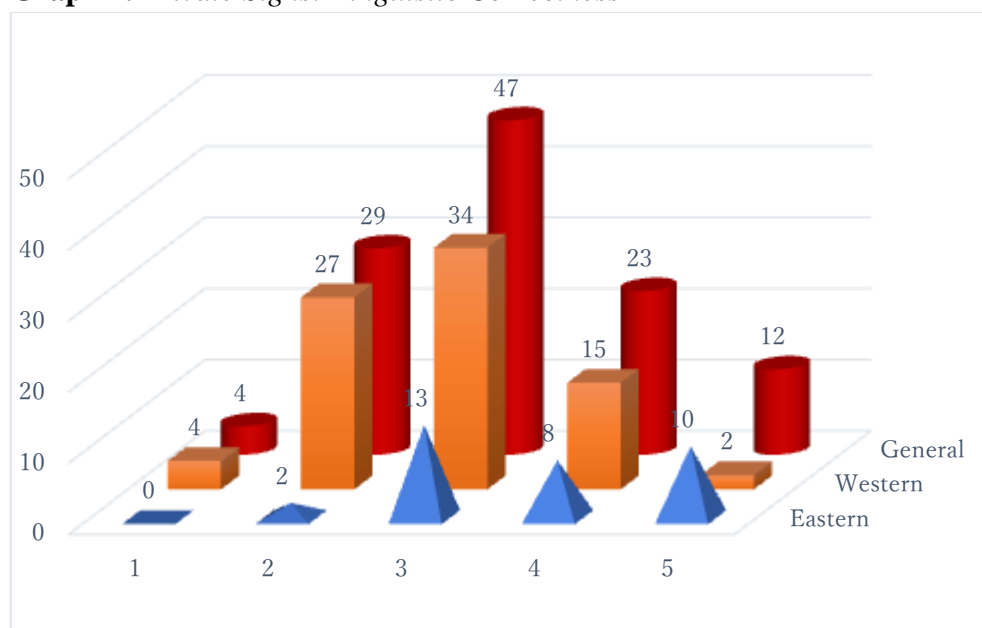


The data is particularly significant, because of the nature of public signs: being mainly informative texts, the needed information must be vehiculated properly, thus avoiding possible problematics for people who lack access to Japanese scripts. On the contrary, for Eastern people, the highest score of 5 represents the majority of the participants, thus evidencing general satisfaction and no particular indication of any kind of problematics for the quality of multilingual signs.

**Graph 3. Public Signs: Impression**

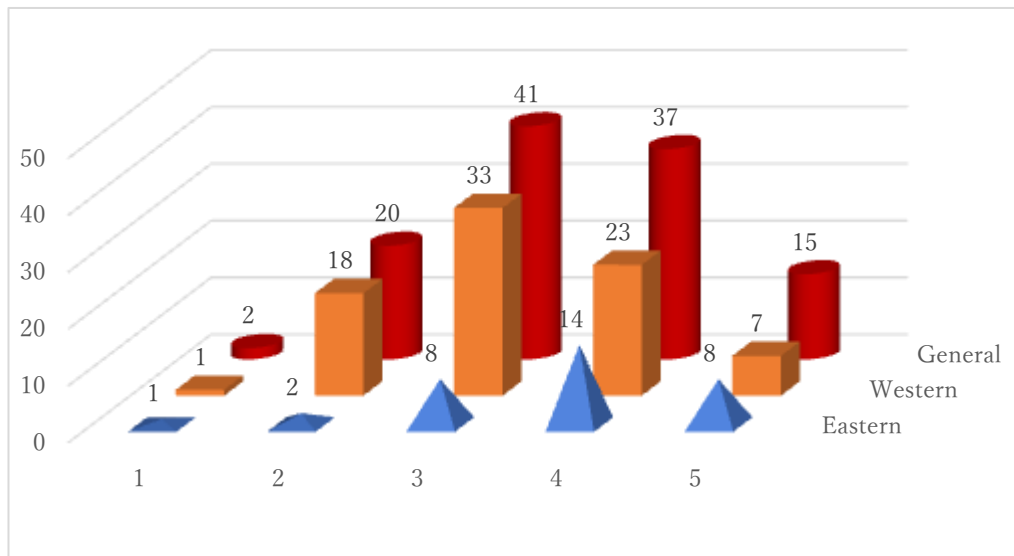


For the visual aspect of public signs, again a general satisfaction is confirmed. The tendency noted for the previous aspects of the survey is verified in this case as well: Eastern people's responses show they are more satisfied than Western people and they judged almost every parameter positively. The only low scores seen also in graph 1 and 2, are from a Singaporean tourist, who, due to the multilingual situation of the country (see Tajima, 2007: 135), probably has an English linguistic background higher than people coming from other Asian countries.

**Graph 4. Private Signs: Linguistic Correctness**

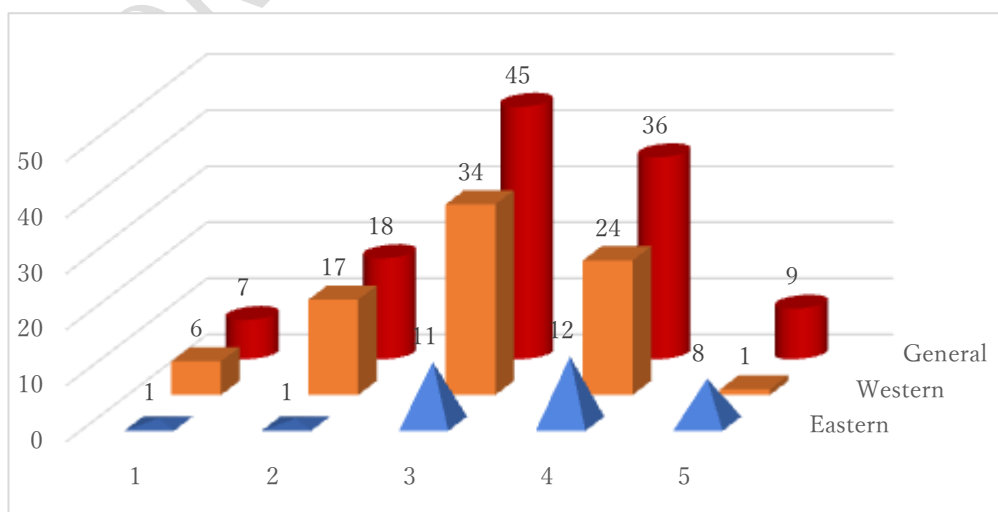
As shown by graph 4, for the linguistic correctness of multilingual signs in the private domain, the situation undergoes relevant changes. The majority of the scores stands, with 47 votes (40%), at around 3. However, what is especially relevant is the prominent difference in correctness perception between the two worlds. As the data shows, in fact, the lowest scores of 1 and 2 (37% of the total with 31 units) are practically an exclusive of Western people, while the highest 5 belongs to the Eastern world. The average score of 2.8 for the Western category clearly denotes a general perception of a high-presence of linguistically wrong signs, thus possibly influencing the impression of Japan as a not-fully developed multilingual country. It must, however, be remarked that, as stated in previous researches (see Haarmann, 1985, 1986), multilingual signs from the private domain of the linguistic landscape, are mostly intended for Japanese people, functioning as emblematic messages (Bloomaert, 2010: 29). It is in any case true that they are indeed physically visible in the urban space, and affect, mostly negatively, foreigners' (above all Westerners') evaluation of Japan's multilingualism level.

1 **Graph 5. Private Signs: Quality of Meaning**



2  
3  
4 The trend so far seems to be confirmed also concerning the quality of the  
5 private signs' meaning, which, in this case, refers to the level of understanding of  
6 mainly shops' posters or communication or menus. It should be noted that for this  
7 particular issue, the average of the two worlds' scores is at the nearest level of  
8 coincidence, with 3,2 and 3,8 respectively for the Western and the Eastern. Even if  
9 the Westerners' disagreement is still quite conspicuous (19 votes, or 23%), the  
10 appreciation scores overcome it with an average of 36%, comprehending the votes  
11 for 4 and 5. The Eastern world confirms a general satisfaction (22 votes, or 66%)  
12 for the multilingual approach of Japanese private signs.

13  
14 **Graph 6. Private Signs: Impression**





particularly high linguistic correctness perceived by Western people, the general score for public signs denotes an overall satisfaction among foreigners. This satisfaction is particularly clear when noticing the most eye-catching words of the cirrus, such as “information”, “good”, “useful”, and “helpful”. On the other hand, however, it is also possible to note negative terms like “overwhelming”, “confusing”, or “funny”. It appears, then, that the high number of multilingual scripts visible in the urban space of Japan is concurrently considered useful/helpful, mainly with respect to linguistic problems, but also overwhelming and confusing-e.g., sometimes causing a driver to miss the important point of a road sign. It must be noticed, however, that respondents are not necessarily interpreting this information’s overwhelming aspect in a negative way: as the cirrus graph also shows, the words “atmosphere”, “attractive”, or “charming” seem to denote (mainly for Western people, who are not often exposed in their countries to an overwhelming linguistic landscape) a sense of appreciation for a characteristic feature, which somehow identifies Japan itself in a positive way:

*A1: Too much, but that's also a characteristic of this Country.*

*A2: For someone who is not used to, sometimes they are too many, and you end up not finding the information you were looking for because there is too much of everything.*

*A3: I actually like it, especially at night. It creates a nice atmosphere.*

*A4: I think it is part of their culture and of their landscapes. I can't think of Japan without those signs.*

Most of the negative comments for this topic concern the confusing aspect of signs, derived from the impression of being exaggeratedly numerous, and the linguistic incorrectness, thus implying wrong messages which do not contribute to a positive judgment of Japan’s visible multilingualism. Although still representing a minority of the comments, foreigners point out the necessity of a native proofreading process, thus avoiding “funny” or “silly” mistakes, before producing multilingual signs.

*A5: They want to make something cool, but it only looks pretty silly in the end.*

*A6: They need to be proofread by native speakers before they are printed*



the present survey it would probably be necessary to consider settling on regulations for the production of foreign scripts. In their present condition, these attempts to appear more globalized and readier for an internationalized society are, in all probability, counterproductive; many of the foreigners' comments appealed for a more authentically "Japanese-looking" landscape, including the reduction of foreign names, which are considered mostly excessive and unnecessary. In this sense, considering the point of view of visitors and foreign residents, it should be more appropriate to fault the overwhelming presence of foreign languages itself, rather than the errors in their naming, which after all are sometimes inevitable when one has not mastered a language.

*A8: I think that in Japan, as in other countries, the use of foreign languages in signs gives a sense of exotic and appealing. But they are not always grammatically or lexically correct.*

*A10: Sometimes they use in a very weird way, without knowing the meaning and it's look so stupid...*

*A11: I find it to be ok, but as a tourist I still may prefer to see Japanese names, maybe written in romaji sometimes. I think, as an average tourist, that could make me feel more comfortable in reading the name and remember it, other than feel part of the place and slowly diving into Japanese culture.*

*A12: Strange sensation. I often wonder why Japanese isn't used very much.*

*A13: 99% of the times the names they choose mean something different in the original language, and it is a silly/offensive naming in most of the cases.*

*A14: A little is ok but too much takes away from the Japan experience*

*A15: Too much and the beauty of Japanese is becoming diluted.*

*A16: It is definitely too much, redundant. Lack of Japanese atmosphere.*





experience” made of Japanese autochthonous scripts, implemented with Roman alphabet readings.

*A17: Please don't use google translator.*

*A18: I don't think they should rely on translation software.*

*A19: No need to adopt a foreign language in your home country unless you have a clear marketing strategy, which, most often than not, is absent.*

*A20: Yes, now that the country is visited by more and more foreigners, could be better to invest more in right translations.*

*A21: Yes, because sometimes they use google translation directly it's really hard to understand.*

*A22: If the interpretation is bad, that can cause confusion. It's important knowing well the meaning of what they will use for it.*

*A23: Yes. Just because it looks cool with English words it doesn't always mean what the sign or poster is supposed to mean.*

*A24: They end up just giving a "Japanese style" of foreign language use, so in the end, they are almost a counter-sense (because of their wrong use).*

Apart from the linguistic side, many opinions contained direct reference to the visual aspect of the signage, mostly appealing for more easily readable scripts, simpler use of fonts, and diversification of colors.

*A25: Stylized kanji is sometimes hard to read.*

*A26: A better font of use of the colors.*

*A27: Maybe color code for the various languages could help.*

*A28: They could be represented in an easier way to read, rather than bombing with too much info in one visual.*

*A29: Every facility and shop try to create colorful signs and posters to stand out, with the result that nothing stands out. Probably simpler, plainer signs and posters might be easier to notice and understand.*

## **Final Considerations**

Through the survey conducted among foreigners, either residents or

1 tourists, it was possible to deduce a sense of the actual degree of  
 2 satisfaction/appreciation and opinions about the multilingual signage of Japan.  
 3 The objects of the survey that were considered were signs from both the private  
 4 and public domain of the linguistic landscape. In these terms, the first clearly  
 5 delineated difference in the judicial attitude towards those signs between  
 6 people from the Western world and from the Eastern one has appeared, mainly  
 7 due to socio-cultural discrepancies at the basis of their concepts of  
 8 multilingualism.

9 In general, according to the results of the survey's analysis, it can be said  
 10 that Japan's visible multilingualism is indeed proceeding towards a more and  
 11 more conspicuous internationalization of its signage, which is becoming almost  
 12 compulsory due to the increasing number of foreigners present in the country.  
 13 This aspect was often denoted in the survey by a common impression of  
 14 "overwhelming" or "unnecessary", multilingual and non, signs all around the  
 15 cities at the national level. However, this implementation of multilingual texts  
 16 is not always necessarily considered positive by foreigners, who in many cases  
 17 would prefer a major presence of traditional scripts, supported by Romanized  
 18 transliterations or translations, even for the private domain. Still, the  
 19 high-amount of scripts, both of public and private signs, is often judged as  
 20 wrong, thus giving a sense of negligence and silliness to the multilingual side  
 21 of Japan. This contributes to aggravating the image of the country's linguistic  
 22 features. This aspect contributes to the conjectural creation of a gap between  
 23 the actual intentions of Japanese public authorities or private owners and the  
 24 foreigners who inevitably "judge" their multilingual visible outputs. It should  
 25 also be noted that astonishingly few previous surveys focusing on the linguistic  
 26 aspects of multilingual signs have been conducted by the authorities and, as the  
 27 most recent documents elaborated by the Japan Tourism Agency in 2019 testify,  
 28 the problem of wrong texts is almost ignored. In this sense, the results obtained  
 29 by the present research should prove to be extremely useful not only for the  
 30 scientific community as a cue for further and more exhaustive surveys, but also  
 31 for the Japanese authorities struggling to improve and develop a multilingual  
 32 environment that is fully recognized internationally.

33 For further research on the visible multilingual situation of Japan, it will be  
 34 necessary to compare the present situation with the one that is going to develop  
 35 through and especially after the Olympics Games, which should be held in  
 36 Tokyo in the summer of 2021. Japan should exploit the remaining period of

more than one year to try to resolve, as much as possible, these remaining issues in order to diminish the existing “multilingual gap” with visitors and make its way towards becoming a sustainable and successful multilingual society.

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