A multi-sited analysis of the linguistic landscape of Hong Kong through a center-periphery approach

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Abstract

Taking a center-periphery approach, this study is a rare attempt to present a multi-sited empirical analysis comparing three physically adjacent and connected sites in a town in Hong Kong to explore the interconnectivity, subjectivity, and dynamicity of the landscape. While all three sites can be considered bilingual or even multilingual spaces with the omnipresence of English, there are noticeable differences in terms of how much English there is, the physical material and semiotic resources through which English is displayed, and in what forms such English exists. In other words, the three sites differ in the degree, texture and creativity of English through the ways in which physical geography, architectural setting and social actors interact.

1 INTRODUCTION

As a relatively young strand of sociolinguistics, linguistic landscape has made some important contributions to our understanding of the patterns of use of English and multilingualism around the world for over a quarter of a century. Many linguistic landscape projects have analyzed the distribution of signs and notices in public spaces by mapping language patterns onto the physical location of a place, mostly based on its position on the horizontal plane through its x and y coordinates in relation to other places. Another dimension which has been examined, though receiving much less academic attention, is the z coordinate – that of height on the vertical plane (Lam & Graddol, 2017). Apart from these three dimensions, the inclusion of a fourth coordinate has also been proposed – that of time (Blommaert, 2015). This paper presents an empirical multi-sited study which investigates linguistic landscape from the lens of center-periphery dynamics (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2013), a recent approach which has increasingly gained traction in the field. While well attested in decades of sociolinguistic studies of geographic variation, a center-periphery approach has only been applied to the study of a relatively small number of places in linguistic landscape research in recent years, with most attempts focusing on a single place or site. Researching three physically adjacent and connected sites in a populous and

seemingly homogenous town in Hong Kong, this study aims to show how a comparative analysis juxtaposing multiple related sites may reveal the relations between the degree, texture and creativity of English in space and the interconnectivity, subjectivity, and dynamicity of the landscape.

2 THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SPACE AND PLACE ACROSS DISCIPLINES

The two interrelated and interdisciplinary concepts of space and place have long intrigued scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines, including but not limited to geography, philosophy, environmental psychology, place marketing and not least linguistics. For geographers, what distinguishes space and place is meaning. Simply put, place is 'a meaningful segment of space' (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). In a relation of meronymy, space is situated in the wider realm, more general, objective and abstract, while place is the part of space with more specific, subjective and associative meaning. Indeed, one of the classic discussions on the notions of space and place can be found in political geography by Agnew (1987). His tripartite definition of place, which involves location, locale and sense of place, is particularly relevant for the purpose of the present discussion. Location, denoting the physical geographical area marked within a spatial framework such as longitude and latitude, is the more objective dimension of place most akin to the abstract idea of space. In this sense, location and space are sometimes used synonymously (see, for example, Agnew, 2011). Locale, by contrast, refers to the manifestation of place as a built environment through such infrastructure as buildings, roads, hospitals, shops and parks. Locale is hence the physical and social setting where actions and practices take place, the peculiar configuration which gives a place its meaning through the weaving of social relations and the unfolding of events. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this study, sense of place concerns the emotive and connotative dimension of place as experienced by social actors through their interaction with a place. It is through the histories, stories and memories of social actors that the unique character of a place is shaped and its identity formed (Massey, 1994). Places are thus 'open and porous networks of social relations' (Massey, 1994, p. 121). Sense of place is therefore subjective, organic and co-constructed, highlighting the dynamic, interconnected and social nature of place.

This focus on place as a social construct has parallels in the philosophical ideas of Lefebvre, through his three-dimensional model of social space (1974/1991). Much applied to research in linguistic landscape (see, for example, Lai, 2013; Lou, 2012; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011), Lefebvre's conceptualization of space is similarly threefold: conceived space, perceived space and lived space. Conceived space is institutional and top-down, referring to the original planning of a space as envisioned and imposed by those in power. Perceived space is structural and material, concerning the physical realization of a space and the social practices associated with it. It thus bears some resemblance to the notion of locale in Agnew's (1987) term. Lived space is individual and bottom-up, presenting the intersection between conceived and perceived space, formed in the minds of social actors through their actual day-to-day lived experiences of a space. It is therefore personal and fluid, overlapping in part with the notion of sense of place.

Taking these characteristics of interconnectivity, subjectivity, and dynamicity further, more contemporary conceptual approaches to the understanding of place view it as an ecosystem. Importantly, a place does not exist in isolation simply as a scientifically delineated space (Williams & Patterson, 1996) akin to Agnew's (2011) location but co-exists and interacts with other places in a system. In addition, its interconnectivity is not only confined to places but also ecologically to people. Environmental psychologists thus take a strong phenomenological orientation to place, which puts human experiences, practices and feelings of a place at the forefront of scholarly attention (Cassinger & Thelander, 2018). In place marketing, a similar move to shift the focus of study from goods to stakeholders has occurred (Warnaby, 2009). Place is defined as an 'adaptable open service ecosystem in which multiple actor sub-ecosystems operate, interact and change over time' (Brown, 2018, p. 58). The dynamicity of place is therefore not only a result of gradual diachronic changes but also of fleeting individual movements and collective flows of social actors in their diverse encounters and interactions with different places. Accordingly, any research into place, landscape included, must take into account these characteristics of place as interconnected, subjective and dynamic in their analysis.

Linguistics too has a long history of studying place, particularly its relationship with language. As a central topic in sociolinguistics, linguistic variation across space is among the most discernible ways to observe variety in language. A center-periphery approach has been well attested in decades of sociolinguistic studies of geographic variation with notable influential examples such as Labov's (2003) models of wave, gravity and cascade diffusion and Kachru's (1985) Three-Circle Model of world Englishes. In these more traditional models, the center is often taken as the single starting point, where the spreading of linguistic norms or the diffusion of language change first takes place. The center is therefore seen as the more superior or powerful initiating force, for instance as agents providing norms or making changes, with the periphery or peripheries passively receiving or accepting norms or changes. In addition, boundaries between the center and the periphery are often treated as clearly demarcated, rigid and inherent, with communities of speakers categorically affiliated with either the center or the periphery but not both, as in the case of social class or native speakership.

A younger strand of sociolinguistics that also deals with the interaction between language and place is linguistic landscape. For the past three decades or so, the field of linguistic landscape has made some key contributions to our understanding of such issues as language policy, multilingualism and world Englishes through three waves of research into signs and space (for recent reviews, see Bolton, Botha, & Lee, 2020a, 2020b). As people come into closer and more frequent contact with one another across physical and digital spaces as a result of international trade and tourism, communication technologies and global migration, the dynamicity of place is further intensified in our age by superdiversity and transcultural flows. Linguistic landscape studies have accordingly evolved to critically reflect on such issues as identity, power and conflict, with further development on the notions of center and periphery. Unlike the earlier center-periphery models, contemporary treatments of the two notions have focused on their two-way interactions as mutual forces on each other, highlighting the relativity, fluidity and multiplicity of center and periphery in

the linguistic landscape. In their edited volume dedicated to core-periphery dynamics in multilingual linguistic minority sites, Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes (2013, p. 2) remarked how 'the center–periphery relationship is never fixed, but instead constantly renegotiated and mutually constitutive.' The notions of center and periphery are therefore by no means deeply rooted in the geographical coordinates of a place based on its physical location. Instead, whether a place is more central or peripheral depends on the subjective experience of the social actors interacting with the place, while taking into account their own and others' role(s), practice(s) and movement(s). In other words, no place is inherently central or peripheral. Rather than dichotomic choices, centers and peripheries are simply relative concepts operating on a continuum without evaluative connotations of superiority or inferiority. In addition, they noted the 'simultaneous, shifting and ambiguous position between peripherality and centrality' (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2013, p. 6). This fluidity means that the same place (and by extension process and language) can be central and peripheral simultaneously in the sense that it may be at the center in one way but on the periphery in another. In a recent study which examined the use of the central business district by foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, Guinto (2019) demonstrated how Tagalog has been both centered and marginalized at the same time in commercial and regulatory signage owing to different norms or orders of indexicality. Further, multiple centers of authority are possible, giving rise to polycentricity. An immigrant neighborhood in Ghent, Belgium, for instance, can be conceived as having multiple centers, each of them with different interactional regimes utilizing distinct sets of language resources (Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005). Similarly, airports are conceptualized as polycentric semiotic spaces, with centers of languages and communities moving in and out of focus through permanent and transient displays (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2013). What these contemporary center-periphery studies share in common is the examination of polycentric spaces as stratified ideological products of heightened mobility in the context of superdiversity, be it through more permanent migration flows that involve lasting population changes, or through more transient travel flows that concern frequent but momentary encounters.

While studies taking a contemporary center-periphery approach in linguistic landscape research underline the value of these two notions and demonstrate their relativity, fluidity and multiplicity, they have thus far only examined a comparatively small number of places around the world, with many of them conducted in Europe or the Americas (see, for example, Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2013). Most studies have focused on a single site (see, for example, Guinto, 2019) or geographically distant sites (see, for example, Jaworski & Thurlow, 2013), investigating the contact between different ethnic, racial or cultural groups through large-scale global flows arising from migration or travel. The present study is a rare attempt to present a multi-sited empirical analysis comparing physically adjacent and connected sites in a populous but seemingly homogeneous town. By considering not only the global transcultural flows at the macro level but also the local day-to-day intra-city flows at the micro level, this study aims to explore the relations between the degree, texture and creativity of English in space and the interconnectivity, subjectivity, and dynamicity of the landscape.

3 METHODOLOGY

Characterized by its vibrancy, high density and cosmopolitanism, Hong Kong is one of the venues around the globe which have attracted considerable attention in sociolinguistic research, in particular, in the field of linguistic landscape (see, for example, Guinto, 2019; Lai, 2013; Lam & Graddol, 2017; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Both Chinese and English are official languages of the city, with the majority of the ethnic-Chinese population using Cantonese (a Chinese dialect) as its usual language. The city can be deemed a center on the global map at the macro level where much landscape-related work has been done. Within Hong Kong, a rough tripartite division of the city from south to north into Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and the New Territories is commonly used. The Island is often considered the very heart of the city because it is the part which was first developed in the colonial era and is still to this day home to the central business district as well as some of the most important historical buildings and political facilities. This study, however, shifts the focus from the usual quintessential metropolitan image of Hong Kong on the Island to a local town known as Shatin (also spelt Sha Tin) in the New Territories. This less obvious but academically interesting area of study can be argued to be peripheral in terms of its historical, political and economic significance. It can thus be perceived as a periphery within a particular center (cf. Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2013).

Developed from the late 1970s mainly on reclaimed land in response to rapid population expansion in Hong Kong, Shatin is a paragon of new town developments. In less than half a century, it has turned from a small village area with only 30,000 inhabitants to the most populous area in the New Territories with a population of 692,806 (Hong Kong Government, 2021), which amounts to almost one-tenth of the total figure residing in the city. Ethnically, racially and linguistically, Shatin can be considered a homogeneous town, with 94% of its population identifying themselves as Chinese and 91% using Cantonese as their usual language according to recent census data (Hong Kong Government, 2021). Because of the high population of Shatin and the high population density of Hong Kong in general, however, sites sharing almost the same geographical location can be very different in terms of their locale and sense of place. As such, sites which are literally next to each other can be associated with diverse social practices or interactional regimes (Blommaert et al., 2005) and hence exhibit distinct characteristics in their linguistic landscapes.

This paper reports on the major fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2019 around the train station in Shatin, the part of town which was first developed. The total area covered is approximately 500-meter radius in size, and can be organized into three zones, all roughly equidistant from each other with the furthest point within five to ten minutes' walk from the train station. These three zones are physically connected to one another by footbridges. As a common feature in urban planning in the new towns of Hong Kong, footbridges allow the street level to be reserved mainly for vehicle traffic, while diverting most human movements and activities to the level of the footbridges. For the purpose of this study, these three zones are marked Zones 1, 2 and 3 based on their distance from the train station. Multiple initial site visits and consultation of site documents including government and business reports, property maps and shop directories were made to record the

structures of the sites and the facilities involved. These site visits and documents then provided a plan to examine the sites more systematically by cataloguing site facilities according to such factors as function, ownership and accessibility. Subsequent site visits then focused on capturing the landscape of the sites based on the catalogue through photography. In total, over 700 photographs and videos of signs were taken from the three zones.

More than 100 informal non-structured interviews were conducted wherever feasible with people interacting with the sites to better understand their sociodemographic background, their use of the space in terms of time and activity, and their views towards the productions or receptions of the signs. About half of these interviews were with residents of the zones, and a quarter each with visitors and shop owners or keepers. Regular observation records were made at different times of the year, days of the week and hours of the day to document the direction and intensity of flows and the level and type of activities involved in the zones. First-hand participant observation was also made by the author who is familiar with the town to inform the analysis. After the completion of the major fieldwork, multiple follow-up site visits were conducted after the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 to make note of any key changes to the patterns observed in the landscape.

To conserve space, the presentation of findings will be limited to those related to the public space in the three zones, with special attention paid to shop signs. Mainly qualitative in nature to capture the interconnectivity, subjectivity, and dynamicity of the landscape, the following analysis will nonetheless start with a quantitative overview of the overall language patterns observed on shop signs in the three zones in order to first give a sense of the scale of the study and to highlight the noticeable changes in the linguistic landscape as we move away from the train station, despite the very close distance concerned. It will then illustrate, via photographs taken at the sites, how these changes are the results of the interaction of the three zones through the actions, practices and movements of the social actors involved. Figure 1 shows a schematic representation of the three zones.

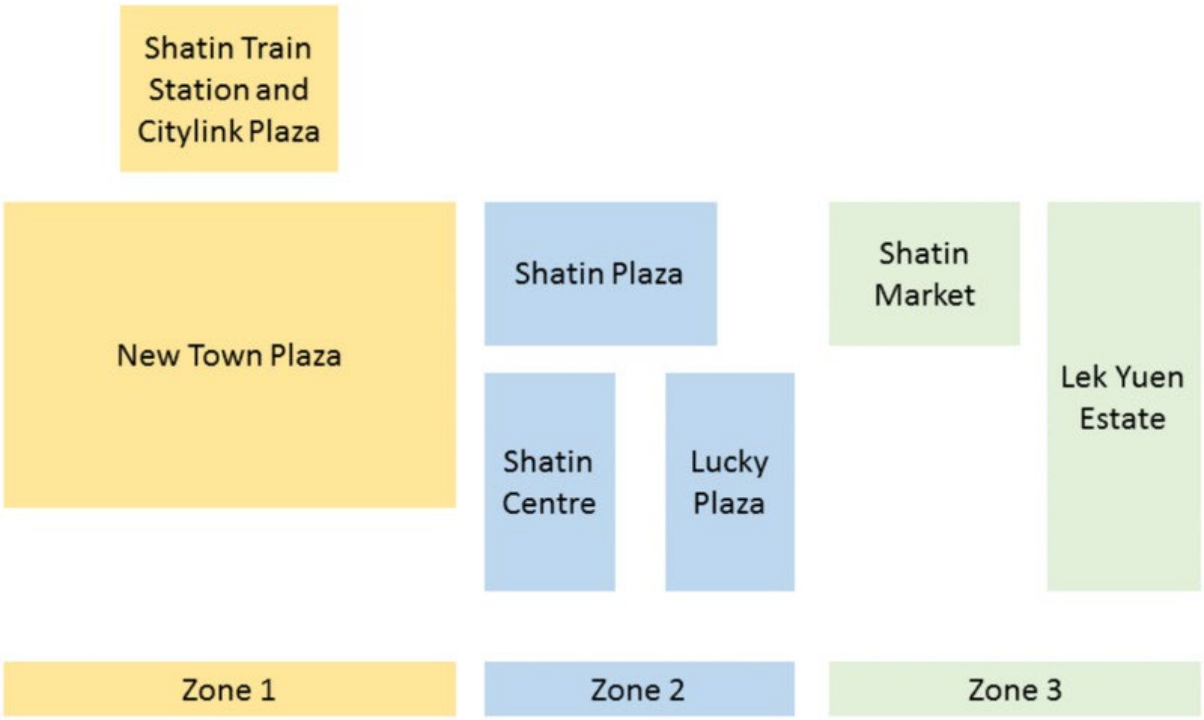

Figure 1. The three zones examined in the study

4 FINDINGS

Overview

Table 1 compares the overall language patterns observed on shop signs in the three zones. As the physical distance from the train station increases, the number of shops decreases. This suggests that retail activities are the most active in Zone 1. The degree of English used in shop signs also shows a similar pattern: Zone 1 has the largest number and proportion of signs in English/Roman script only (217, 69.3%), with a dramatic decrease in the figures across Zone 2 (54, 26.2%) and Zone 3 (9, 8.3%). On the contrary, the number of bilingual signs in both English and Chinese increases as we move away from the train station, particularly sharply from Zone 1 (44, 14.1%) through Zone 2 (109, 52.9%), and to Zone 3 (78, 72.2%). These patterns, which suggest in number the marked differences in the linguistic landscape across the three zones, will be explained in detail in each zone below.

TABLE 1. Language on shop signs in the three zones

Zone	Number of shops	Signs in English/in the Roman script only	Signs in Chinese characters only	Signs in both
1	313 (100%)	217 (69.3%)	52 (16.6%)	44 (14.1%)

Zone	Number of shops	Signs in English/in the Roman script only	Signs in Chinese characters only	Signs in both
2	206 (100%)	54 (26.2%)	43 (20.9%)	109 (52.9%)
3	108 (100%)	9 (8.3%)	21 (19.4%)	78 (72.2%)
ALL	627 (100%)	280 (44.7%)	116 (18.5%)	231 (36.8%)

Zone 1

The locale of this zone includes the architectural structure housing the train station (Citylink Plaza), and the one immediately attached to it (New Town Plaza). Citylink Plaza is a multi-functional complex sitting on the train station that consists of a shopping mall with one retail floor and an eight-story mixed commercial tower of stores and offices. New Town Plaza is a nine-story luxurious shopping mall much larger in size, which is directly linked to the entrance of the train station (Figure 2A), with a main transport hub making up of a bus terminus, shuttle bus stop and taxi stand on the ground floor, and another bus and minibus terminus right next to the train station. This zone is therefore a public space functioning as a retail and business area, with a major transportation network sprawling to other parts of Hong Kong and serving commuters of the district. Covering more than 150,000 square meters of combined retail floor area on seven floors with more than 300 shops in total, the two fully-enclosed, weatherproof shopping malls combined are among the largest shopping centers of the city and accommodate the largest number of shops of the three zones examined. They also have the highest percentage of international brands and chain stores selling high-end and middle-range products, especially fashion and cosmetic items. As one of the most popular shopping malls in Hong Kong and arguably at one point *the* busiest in the world (Xue, 2016), New Town Plaza and its closest neighbor Citylink Plaza together attract massive footfall of 300,000 to 400,000 average daily visitors to Zone 1 (Capital, 2017), making it a local hub for commuters, shoppers, companies, workers, residents and tourists.

Figure 2. Zone 1

Like many upmarket indoor shopping venues in Hong Kong, the linguistic and semiotic landscape of Zone 1 is ironically characterized by its indistinguishability from other extravagant shopping facilities within the city, and possibly from many similar sites around the world. Here the globalized discourse of consumerism dominates, through a lavish display of familiar and iconic brand names and logos seen everywhere, principally realized linguistically in English (Figure 2B) but also in other Western European languages in the Roman script, most commonly French and Italian (Figure 2C). The use of these languages, together with other carefully-selected semiotic resources in orthography and typography, connotes stylishness and sophistication here and contributes to the dominance of 'globalese' (Jaworski, 2015) or 'global commercialese' – a code 'not associated with any particular nation or language' (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2013, p. 178). On the shopfront of multinational retail stores, globalese is not simply noted by its presence but also by its relative size and order of appearance. On the rare occasions when another language, typically Chinese in this case, is present, the English/European linguistic component is unmistakably larger in size and comes first, either on top of or before the other language (Figure 2D). While these European languages largely associated with the privileged class in the developed world in this particular context of consumerism are prominently and regularly on display, there is little actual evidence of linguistic diversity here, as these shop signs are essentially produced in corporate nonlanguages in the guise of familiar resources from English and a few other languages 'to index diversity in a uniform manner' (Piller, 2011, p. 109). Together these highly decontextualized promotional signs on sleek silvery metallic plates jointly turn Zone 1 into a posh yet unrecognizable nonplace (Augé, 1995), vying for shoppers' attention as they lose sense of space and time. This high level of homogeneity and predictability of the linguistic and semiotic landscape is further reinforced

by technology through full-length interactive touch-screens with multiple-language interfaces installed in strategic entry points of the shopping malls. With the centering and decentering of shops taking place through the transition of animated images on the electronic panels, each shop is turned into digital pixels on the electronic directory, semiotically presented within boxes of the same size, format and layout (Figure 2E). As such, while technology seemingly enhances interactivity with the mall users, it also at the same time stifles individuality of the shops. In this zone with the strongest trace of globalization and transcultural flows of luxury capitalism, the multinational consumerist corporate voice rules through the veil of a consistent, modern and glamourous image orchestrated by the shopping mall management. There is little space for individuality, idiosyncrasy or innovation operationalized in this very zone.

Unsurprisingly then, the most visible social actors in this retail and business zone are shoppers and diners from the local community and tourists, and to a lesser extent, employees working in the shops and offices here. High-spending tourists from Mainland China, particularly before the age of COVID-19, have multiplied exponentially in number in Zone 1 in the last decade as they enjoy the convenience of shopping for such luxury products as jewelry and watches in the perennially air-conditioned malls right on the train line with direct connections to the intra-national border. The scenes of tourists lugging around with bulging suitcases in this zone have thus become a common, if not defining, feature of the landscape (Figure 2F), sometimes to the chagrin of local residents (Miquiabas, 2015). Importantly, Zone 1 is an active center of activity mostly in the daytime when residents and visitors come and engage in the social practices of commuting, shopping, dining and doing business transactions (Figure 2A). As the evening period immediately after the office hours approaches when residents return from other parts of the city, Zone 1 reaches its peak use and is the most hectic when commuters, shoppers and tourists all congregate. In the nighttime as shops and offices close and trains stop running (Figure 2B and 2C), it is sidelined to the periphery as it becomes dormant. There is thus a regular pattern of inflow of social actors in the morning and outflow in the night. A similar pattern of peak and trough applies not only to the hours of the day but also to the days of the week and to the months of the year, with greater footfall arising from high-end shopping and dining sprees at the weekends, on public holidays and also over longer holiday seasons such as Christmas and the Lunar New Year.

Zone 2

The locale of this zone includes three composite private property developments (Shatin Plaza, Shatin Centre and Lucky Plaza), each of which consists of a podium and a tower block. As an architectural form commonly found in skyscrapers in Hong Kong, the podium is a horizontal platform between the ground and the tower which supports the weight of a building. It has an important social function of demarcating the boundary between public and private spaces (Lam & Graddol, 2017). For the three developments concerned, the multi-story podiums contain inside them the publicly accessible shopping areas and car parks, while the podium terraces above accommodate recreational and communal facilities

including playgrounds and sports amenities only exclusively available to residents living in the towers atop the podiums. This zone is therefore a mix of public and private space, functioning as a retail and residential area. The three shopping centers on the podium level of the three buildings feature more than 200 shops in total in a combined gross shopping area of approximately 35,000 square meters. These shops offer products mostly in the categories of fashion, accessories, and healthcare, though there are also a few employment agencies for foreign domestic helpers and stores for remittance services.1 In the three residential tower blocks above, more than 3,000 private apartment units are homes to middle-class residents. All three buildings are interconnected with each other via covered footbridges on the podium, while Shatin Plaza and Shatin Centre are also directly linked to New Town Plaza through fully-enclosed passageways (Figure 3A).

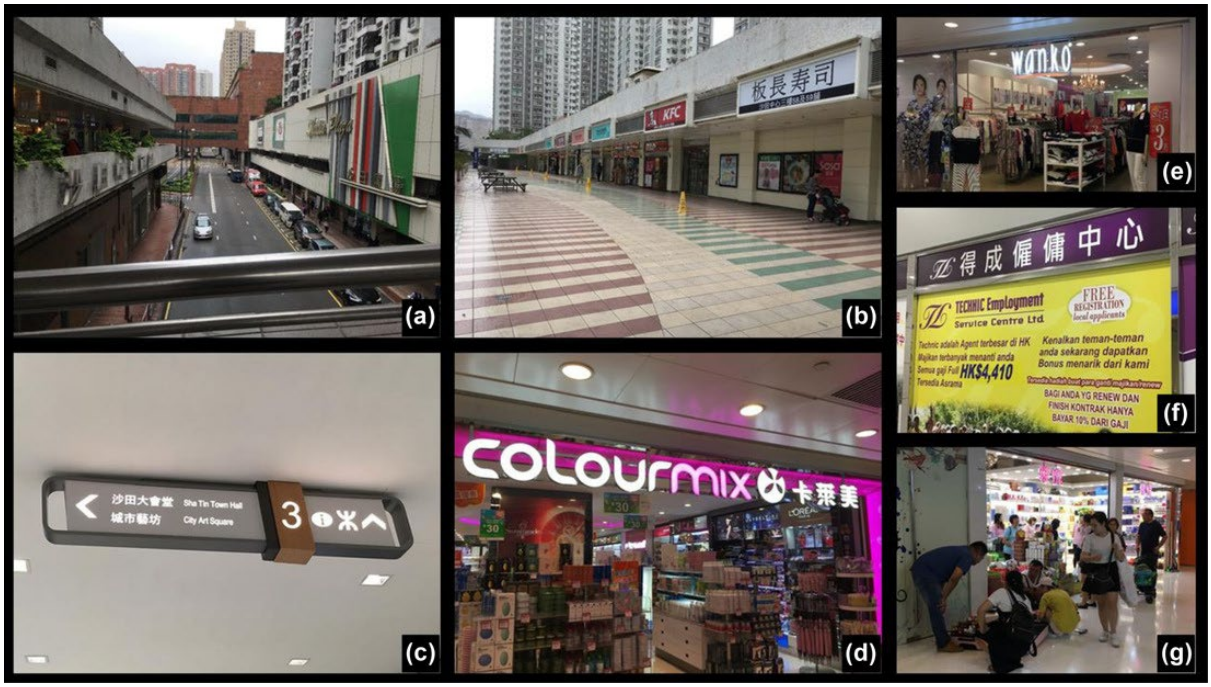

Figure 3. Zone 2

Compared with Zone 1, the shopping centers in Zone 2 are much smaller in size and less 'cosmopolitan,' with a tenant mix composing of fewer international brands and more local or regional chain stores and a small number of independent shops. Accordingly, the linguistic and semiotic landscape is less 'Westernized' with a stronger presence of Chinese both on less ostentatious shopfronts (Figure 3B) and on informational signage (Figure 3C). Not only is there a much lower proportion of signs in English only, half of the signs are also linguistically realized in both Chinese and English (Figure 3D). Further, owing to the prevalence of territory- or region-wide chain stores, a large proportion of signs here are also commonly found around the city or even in other Asian cities. The English component of these shop signs often involves the creation of neologisms through the compounding or blending of existing English words. Less commonly, European or European-sounding names

are adopted or created by Hong Kong based companies, often for the brand names of fashion or cosmetic stores. In a smaller number of cases, new words in the Roman script without much obvious resemblance to English or other European languages are coined, at times with unintended association which may sound potentially embarrassing or amusing to an English speaker (Figure 3E). Table 2 lists some examples of the range of linguistic innovation observed on shop signs in Zone 2.

TABLE 2. Examples of linguistic innovation on shop signs in Zone 2

Pattern 1 (compounding or blending existing English words)	**Pattern 2 (adopting or creating European / European-sounding words)**	**Pattern 3 (coining words in the Roman script)**
Colourmix	Bossini	Veeko
Embryform	Giordano	Wanko
Fairwood	Joy de Passeio	Wishh!
MoneyGram		
Petline		
Prizemart		
Vita Green		
WorldMate Medical Clinic		

Promotional signs exhibiting linguistic creativity at the city-wide corporate level on common but durable plastic surfaces in this zone therefore exude a sense of local and regional rather than global sameness, with the domination of more home-grown and Asian high-street brands. At the same time, the presence of employment and remittance service centers introduce other South-East Asian languages such as Tagalog and Indonesian into the linguistic landscape (Figure 3F), catering for the Filipino and Indonesian domestic helper communities living in the apartment blocks above and nearby who frequent these shops. It can therefore be argued that there is a stronger local or regional place identity as revealed by the linguistic and semiotic landscapes, though it would perhaps still be difficult to pinpoint the exact district or spot within the city based on a collective image of shop signs in this zone. The local and translocal consumerist corporate voice thus prevails here, interspersed with some intermittent examples of linguistic innovation and diversity of less privileged communities.

The most active social actors in this residential and retail zone are therefore mainly residents of the private apartments and shoppers, though foreign domestic helpers and visitors from Mainland China are also visibly present. While helpers use the employment and remittance services typically on a Sunday when most of them have a day-off, Mainland Chinese visitors pay regular visits on a daily basis to the pharmacies, replenishing their supplies of medicine, powdered infant formula or personal hygiene products. In this zone then, it is the scenes of visitors packing and unpacking suitcases filled with everyday amenities on the floor which are more common (Figure 3G). Compared with tourists in Zone 1, Mainland Chinese visitors in this zone are thus more likely grocery shoppers, or even parallel traders, rather than luxury goods consumers. While the shopping areas in Zone 2 become inactive in the nighttime like in Zone 1 as shoppers and tourists recede, the tower blocks upstairs experience their peak use in the evening with residents coming back to their homes. The flows of social actors here hence differ from the unidirectional flow in Zone 1: residents leave their tower block apartments atop the podium in the morning for work and return in the evening, while shoppers from within the district and beyond visit the shopping centers on the podium floors below in the daytime and leave in the nighttime. As such, there is a regular mixed pattern of inflow and outflow of social actors at different times of the day, involving opposite patterns of movements of local and external communities of social actors.

Zone 3

The locale of this zone includes a wet market (Shatin Market) and a public housing estate (Lek Yuen Estate). With 172 rather primitive but permanent stalls selling mostly fresh and frozen foods on three floors, Shatin Market is one of the largest wet markets in the district. Adjacent to the market, Lek Yuen Estate is the first public housing estate in Shatin. Offering more than 3,000 apartment units in seven residential tower blocks, it represented a new generation of more self-contained council housing at the time of completion in 1975 through the provision of its own communal and local shopping amenities featuring more than 100 shops. Scattered around the estate with some on unsheltered routes, these small independent stores, mostly in the form of local eateries, bakeries, supermarkets, clinics and repair services, offer products and services at affordable prices involving mostly small transactions to working-class tenants, in a combined gross shopping area of approximately 3,400 square meters. Similar to Zone 2 then, this zone is also a mix of public and private space, functioning as a retail and residential area. Shatin Market is connected to the podium level of Lucky Plaza in Zone 2 by a semi-covered walkway, and linked to Lek Yuen Estate by a covered but not fully-enclosed footbridge (Figure 4A). Access from Zone 2 to Zone 3 and between facilities in Zone 3 are therefore not completely weatherproof.

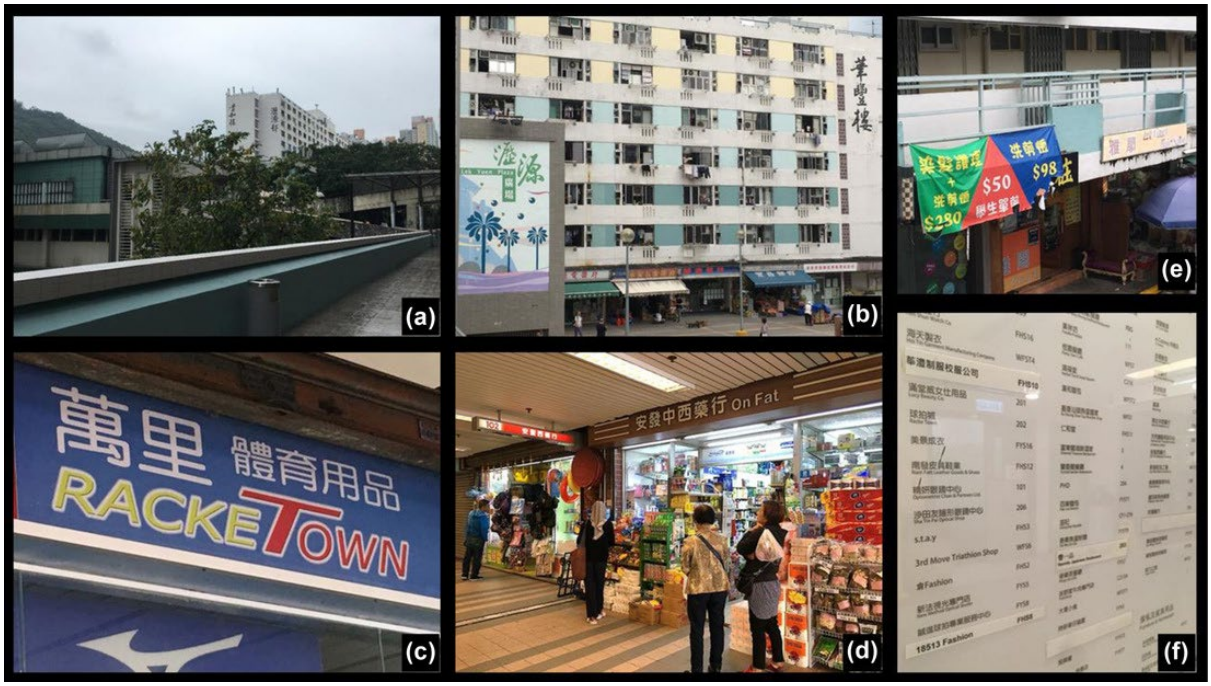

Figure 4. Zone 3

The small independent shops and stalls in Zone 3, some of whose existence date back to decades ago, imbue the linguistic and semiotic landscape of this space with a nostalgic feel and a much stronger sense of place of the locality. Here, Chinese plays a much prominent role in the landscape (Figure 4B). The only other language present apart from Chinese is English, with English-only signs found on a very small minority of shopfronts and are the least common of the three zones. On bilingual signs that are the largest in number in this zone, Chinese almost invariably comes first, be it at the top or on the left, and is consistently bigger in size than English (Figure 4C). Importantly, a notable feature of English on signs in this zone is transliteration, which involves here a rather idiosyncratic practice of converting Chinese characters into made-up English words based on similar sounds through a mix of systems of Romanization, without much consideration of other aspects such as grammar or meaning. Such English names typically contain two parts in a particular order: first, the core identifying component of the name which signals local identity through transliteration (e.g. Fun Yuen); and second, the typological component which characterizes the nature of business through more standardized English words (e.g. Electrical Co.). As such, these hybrid 'English' signs exhibit a high level of individual linguistic creativity and bear strong characteristics of Chinese, which can be endearing to the locals but partly incomprehensible, and at times amusing, to English speakers (Figure 4D). Table 3 lists some examples of the range of linguistic innovation observed on shop signs in Zone 3.

TABLE 3. Examples of linguistic innovation on shop signs in Zone 3

Pattern 1 (*Chinese name in transliteration* + standardized English words denoting the nature of business)	**Pattern 2 (*Chinese name in transliteration* + unconventional / new use of English words denoting the nature of business)**	**Pattern 3 (Pattern 1 + extra English words in a mixed order)**	**Pattern 4 (New English words / new orthographic representation of English words)**
Fun Yuen Electrical Co.	*Cheong Ming* Offset & Design Co.	Gold *Hang Heung* Seafood Restaurant	Foodie-Fruities
Hang Yuen Cafe	*Hin Ming* Cosmetic	Good Luck *Karm Yung* Electrical	RackeTown
Him Shun Watch Company	*Shing Kee* Noodle	Optometrist *Chan* & Partners Ltd.	s.t.a.y.
Hon Fung Photo and Video Centre	*Wing On* Domestic	*Sha Tin* Pal Optical Shop	
Hop Shing Furniture			
Ka Fu Dried Seafood Grocery			
Kam Uk Style Parlour			
King Wah Medicine Shop			
Lek Yuen Barber			
Mei Wah Export Garment			
Nam Fatt Leather Goods & Shoes			
Nam Pei Medicine			

Pattern 1 (*Chinese name in transliteration* + standardized English words denoting the nature of business)	**Pattern 2 (*Chinese name in transliteration* + unconventional / new use of English words denoting the nature of business)**	**Pattern 3 (Pattern 1 + extra English words in a mixed order)**	**Pattern 4 (New English words / new orthographic representation of English words)**
Ngai Lam Stationery *On Fat* Medicine Company *Pak Lok* Bakery *Po Kwong* Book & Stationery Co. *Sun Mei* Steam Laundry Co. *Tai Yuen* Electrical Co. *Waka* Piano Company *Wing Lok* Bakery			

Sited in an old grassroots area, promotional signs here typically have an unassuming character, individually crafted and orthographically presented in old-fashioned fonts on inexpensive materials, with a constant display of signs of wear and tear (Figure 4E). Flashy electronic directories are nowhere in sight in this zone. Shop information is listed instead on a plastic board with corrections or updates made on pieces of paper stuck directly onto the board (Figure 4F). On closer inspection, a number of shops have their English names misspelt on the directory. It is however curiously this semiotic trace of historicity showing the passage of time and the occasional lapse in attention, together with the local linguistic innovation observed earlier, which renders this space distinct. The unique combination of small independent shops and the resulting inimitable linguistic and semiotic landscape make this place instantly recognizable. In this zone then, it is the diverse, heterogeneous voices

from individual local shop owners which together define and distinguish the space through linguistic innovation and semiotic nostalgia at the micro level.

Interestingly, it is homogeneity, rather than heterogeneity, which seems to characterize the social actors who are active in this residential and retail zone. Both the wet market and the housing estate have a strong local ambience, with few external shoppers or visitors from outside the district. With homes in a heavily-subsidized public housing estate built more than four decades ago, residents in Zone 3 are often middle-aged or above with a relatively low level of education and income. Similarly, the wet market and the shopping area of the estate are frequented overwhelmingly by locals from older age groups residing in the neighborhood. Unlike Zones 1 and 2 then, Zone 3 is an absent space for outsiders. In the daytime, this zone is very much alive with local housewives and elderly people swamping the wet market and the shops in the estate. While some residents in the zone are retirees and stay home during the day in the tower blocks, other residents go through Zone 2 to Zone 1 to commute to other parts of the city for work and return home in the evening. The flow of social actors here, hence is fairly unidirectional but opposite to the one in Zone 1, with a net outflow in the morning and an inflow in the nighttime. Since shops sell everyday amenities to the local community, there is also little seasonal variation in the patterns of flow of social actors throughout the year.

5 DISCUSSION

The degree, texture and creativity of English

Exploring the interconnectivity, subjectivity, and dynamicity of the landscape through a center-periphery approach in the treatment of place, this study has focused on the populous but peripheral Shatin, a lesser-known town in Hong Kong at the macro level on the global scale. Within this town, three zones immediately next to each other around the train station have been examined. While all the three zones can be considered bilingual or even multilingual spaces with the omnipresence of English, there are noticeable differences in terms of how much English there is, the physical material and semiotic resources through which English is displayed, and in what forms such English exists. In other words, the three zones differ in terms of the degree, texture and creativity of English through the ways in which physical geography, architectural setting and social actors interact.

Zone 1 sees a dominance of standardized English on signs both in size and in frequency, with the occasional use of Western European languages in the Roman script, and only a small number of Chinese-only signs. On a seven-point language landscape scale describing the degree of English from no English (Level 0) to monolingual English (Level 6) (Graddol, 2013), Zone 1 is perhaps best described as between Levels 4 and 5 – dominance of English and almost entirely English, where '[n]uance is expressed through English in advertisements by using loan words and expressions from other European languages in ways which reflect English native-speaker connotations' (Graddol, 2013, p. 81). It is, however, important to stress here again that English merely serves a symbolic function in Zone 1, as my fieldwork shows that the majority of the social actors interacting with the space are local residents

and Mainland Chinese tourists, who are second or foreign speakers of English with some or little knowledge of the language. Indeed, interviews with visitors to the mall reveal that many of them are not sure about the exact spelling, pronunciation or origin of the brand names on the shop signs but are able to recognize the brands nonetheless simply by their iconic features in typography and color which require painstaking effort to design and standardize. As such, the only essential element in these signs is the brand name, as the nature of business is assumed to be well known by the visitors. English in Zone 1 is hence simply global commercialese and corporate nonlanguage, prevailing on lavish glossy signs which are so consistent in material and style as heavily regulated by corporate policies and standards that they exude a strong sense of intense global sameness found in luxury shopping malls around the world through capitalist transcultural flows. As remarked by Bolton (2012, p. 30), '[t]hrough globalization, the world has become more connected, more consumerist, increasingly corporatized, and, often, increasingly mundane.' There is thus little linguistic innovation in this zone, resulting in a decontextualized, bland, homogeneous and undistinguishable linguistic landscape, showing no trace of its geographical origin.

Zone 2 sees a balance of English-only and Chinese-only signs, with half of the signs bilingually realized in both languages, and a small number of signs in South-East Asian languages. On the degree of English scale then, Zone 2 is at Level 3 – bilingual, where both Chinese and English are given roughly equal weighting (Graddol, 2013). Not only is there a decrease in the degree of English as we move from Zone 1 to Zone 2, there is also a visible change in the texture. Showing some evidence of visual design in typography and color but conspicuously less elaborate than those in Zone 1, the Chinese and English brand names in Zone 2 are displayed on signs which are durable and practical but noticeably much less glamorous, occasionally accentuated by neon or LED lighting. New English words making up the brand names are formed by compounding, blending, borrowing or coining, again without explicit specification of the nature of business on the signs (see again Table 2), as most of these brands are found in chain stores citywide or regionally in Asia. Zone 2 thus exhibits a sense of regional and local sameness found in shopping malls around Hong Kong, and perhaps parts of Asia, with some evidence of linguistic innovation at the local or translocal level, revealing characteristics of Hong Kong English and Asian English and creating a more diverse, glocalized, and regionally recognizable linguistic landscape.

Zone 3 sees a marked contrast to the prominence of English on signs both in size and in frequency. While the majority of the signs here are bilingual in both Chinese and English, the use of the latter language is strongly infused with local characteristics involving idiosyncratic spelling, romanization practices, and novel syntactic or lexical features not commonly found in other varieties of English. The form of English found in signs here may therefore be described as 'non-standard.' On the degree of English scale then, Zone 3 straddles between Levels 1 and 2 – hints of English and limited bilingualism, where English use is mostly restricted to basic 'translations' of the local language (Graddol, 2013). On the surface, then, English seems to only play a subsidiary or peripheral role here. Yet it is on signs in this zone where we see how English is creatively exploited as a resource that is meaningfully combined in use with Chinese to reflect one's inherent hybrid bilingual identity in examples of local forms exclusive to this neighborhood but not anywhere else in the world. Indeed, in

the interviews with owners of these small independent shops who have been there for decades or even generations, the use of English on the signs is often considered natural and unmarked just as Chinese. Even though many owners are not highly proficient in English and do not often if at all encounter English-speaking customers, they still consider it normal to include both Chinese and English on their shop signs because this is 'how things are done in Hong Kong.' A few also comment on how the brand name in English (often a transliteration of the Chinese name or Romanized Cantonese) reflects the identity of the shop as much as the brand name in Chinese (cf. Bolton et al. 2020a, 2020b). Here in Zone 3 with a different order of indexicality, English is no longer a marker of prestige, status or globalization as in Zone 1 or as has been noted in many previous studies, but instead a symbol of local hybrid identity. Unlike those in Zones 1 and 2, most shop signs in Zone 3 include a label or description of their nature of business, such as 'cosmetic' and 'noodle,' again reflecting local and individual characteristics of English (see again Table 3). Although these signs with Chinese and/or English words make use of very basic and at times minimal design features in typography and color, linguistic innovation is the most thriving at this localized level, with signs illustrating the unpredictable and highly original examples of individual creativity and contributing to a unique, rich, heterogeneous and instantly identifiable linguistic landscape.

Social actors, flows and polycentricity

Rather than conceptualizing circles (or rather, zones, in this case) as static segregated space and occupied by entirely different communities of speakers from inherently dissimilar language backgrounds, the present study considers center-periphery dynamics which places emphasis on the mobility of social actors and the permeability of space. In other words, the same social actors may interact with different zones at different times with a change of roles, practices and movements. This highlights the dynamicity of social identities, and the interaction between such changing social identities and the landscape. Even within a geographic area of such a modest size with three zones only five to ten minutes of walking distance from each other, we see a change of roles of social actors as they navigate space and collectively create flows. In the morning, residents from Zone 2 and 3 – both retail and residential space with stronger local and localized characteristics in the landscape – become commuters as they converge in Zone 1 – the center of activity as a non-living space with a strong globalized flavor – for public transport to other parts of the city. In the evening, commuters diverge from Zone 1 to return home as residents, as Zones 2 and 3 become the centers as living space. Through their individual movements and collective everyday flows in space, social actors change their roles as they engage in different social practices in different zones with clearly distinguishable linguistic landscapes. Places are thus perceived as forming an open dynamic network of centers at different times, without the sharp demarcation of communities with rigid impenetrable boundaries.

Returning to the notions of place and space, while all the three zones share almost the exact same location because of their physical proximity, their locale and sense of place are distinctively different. As a node solely for the purpose of traffic, retail and business, Zone 1 can be considered a center in terms of history, development and footfall relative to the

other two zones. Throughout the growth of Shatin as a new town, it has been designed institutionally as a center in the conceived space of the urban planners. Indeed, the area that Zone 1 occupies is officially termed 'Shatin Centre.' With its locale, or perceived space, made up of a transport hub, first-tier shopping malls and offices, Zone 1 is the node where people converge for daytime activities. It is also the English-concentrated center where the class of local elites, rather than the super-elites at the macro level, is most likely to be found (cf. Thurlow & Jaworski, 2012). In terms of linguistic innovation, however, it is on the periphery with little room for individuality and idiosyncrasy. The aliening sameness displayed in the landscape contributes to the sense of placelessness (Agnew, 2011), a void of emotional attachment, and a lack of sense of place. By contrast, Zone 3 is peripheral historically, economically and demographically. With its locale consisting of a public housing estate and small grocery shops filled with working-class low-income residents, Zone 3 is both a conceived space for the margins and a perceived space on the margins – ramshackle, aging and unattended. Yet it is in this zone that the richest level of linguistic innovation brimming with local features, practices and identities can be found. Zone 3 can therefore be considered a center of linguistic innovation, where unique creations are given the space to flourish. The distinctiveness of its landscape shapes and is shaped by the lived space that gives rise to its unique sense of place. In sum, a conventional center can be peripheral in innovation, while a conventional periphery can be the center of innovation. It is therefore not only polycentricity which is in force, but the simultaneous centricity and peripherality of a place.

6 CONCLUSION

In an ordinary unassuming town away from the central business district of Hong Kong, this study has shown the value of a more contemporary center-periphery approach in linguistic landscape research. In particular, the analysis has delineated the notions of location, locale and sense of place through the examination of the linguistic landscape of three zones which are in close proximity to each other in location but highly distinctive in locale and sense of place. Such differences are deeply engraved on the landscape not only materially but also discursively and are partly reflected in the degree, texture and creativity of English. At different levels then, the study has illustrated how a place can be central and peripheral at the same time. While the scope of this work only allows an investigation into one small area in one city, the study has nonetheless demonstrated the importance of taking into account the everyday flows of social actors, the simultaneous centricity and peripherality of place and the permeability of space in the theoretical understanding of landscape. If we are to achieve a deeper and more thorough understanding of landscape, including its linguistic and semiotic dimensions, we must acknowledge its interconnectivity, subjectivity, and dynamicity in our attempt to advance its theoretical development by means of empirical research which not only accommodates but also more importantly embraces these characteristics. This study, hopefully, is a small step towards that direction.

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NOTE

1 In 2018, the developer of Lucky Plaza in Zone 2 announced a plan of major refurbishment of the ground and podium floors in 40 years. Renovation started in 2020 and will be fully completed in 2024. It remains to be seen how the revamp, particularly of the shopping mall, will affect the landscape of Zone 2 and the adjacent areas.

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