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COVID-19 IN THE MALAYSIAN AND ITALIAN LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

Keywords: COVID-19, Italy, linguistic landscape, Malaysia, language attitudes.

ABSTRACT

This article looks at signs that have appeared in the linguistic landscape in Malaysia and in Italy since the lockdown implemented in both countries in March 2020. The research is divided into two main parts, one analyzing the signs collected, and the other analyzing the answers provided by a sample of Malaysian and Italian citizens to a survey on the languages used in these signs. After a general introduction to the COVID-19 crisis in the two countries, the article continues with a general overview of the linguistic landscape in Malaysia and Italy and the methodology employed. There follows an analysis of both the signs and the answers provided in the surveys and a discussion, where the signs and the respondents' answers in the two countries are compared. Even though some of the signs analyzed are very similar in Malaysia and Italy, particularly the regulatory signs recommending the use of face masks, social distance, washing hands, etc., others have shown to be quite different. In Italy, for example, they are more visible and detailed, whereas in Malaysia they tend to be more colourful. In some cases, the colours used on some signs in Malaysia subtly recall the national flag (red, blue, white and yellow), whereas light green/cyan and white were found on many signs in Italy. With regard to the languages used, both countries feature only the national language (Malay in Malaysia and Italian in Italy) and English on their COVID-19 signs, but English is much more visible in Malaysia than in Italy.

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic known as COVID-19 hit the whole world; starting from Wuhan in China in December 2019 it spread rapidly all over five continents, infecting millions of people and killing nearly three and a half million (as of May 2021), especially the elderly, and people with previous medical conditions (Wikipedia. 'COVID-19 pandemic'). COVID-19 arrived in Malaysia via Singapore in late January 2020 with a handful of

cases. However, the cases began to increase more quickly after a large Tablighi Jamaat religious gathering was held between the end of February and the beginning of March in Sri Petaling, Kuala Lumpur – an event that the authorities had allowed to go ahead, while many other secular events had already been called off. In the middle of March, a quite strict total lockdown (MCO, Movement Control Order) was implemented in the whole country which lasted until the beginning of May, after which a less severe version (CMCO) replaced it until the beginning of January 2021 when, due to an increase in the number of contagions, a new MCO was announced in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor which has been extended to the whole country, and has become stricter since the 12th of May 2021. To date nearly half a million people have been infected (but probably many more were asymptomatic), with over 2,000 deaths (Wikipedia. 'COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia').

As far as Italy is concerned, the first cases of COVID-19 were detected at the very end of January and in February 2020. At first only 11 municipalities in the Lombardy region in Northern Italy were placed under quarantine in February, but the contagion was not contained. Subsequently, as COVID-19 began to spread all over Italy, on the 9th of March a total lockdown of the whole country was implemented, about one week before the lockdown in Malaysia began. In a similar way to Malaysia, from May onwards the restrictions were gradually eased. However, an increase in cases in October led to more restrictions. Even though the reasons are not clear, the pandemic had been much more serious in Italy than in Malaysia until May 2021; to date over four million people (out of a population of a little over 60 million) have been infected in Italy and as many as 122,833 have died, 60 times more than in Malaysia (whose population is nearly 33 million people) (Wikipedia. 'COVID-19 pandemic in Italy').

The linguistic landscape of Kuala Lumpur and probably of the whole of Malaysia has not changed much since the first MCO was implemented, however a few new posters and notices have appeared related to the pandemic. In Italy, signs related to COVID-19 seem to be more visible than in Malaysia.

In this article, a sample of these posters and notices have been analyzed. Two main aspects have been focused upon: 1) the general aspect, i.e. the meaning and graphics of these signs; 2) the languages used and their symbolic significance. In addition, an online survey was carried out in the two countries to test the respondents' attitudes and opinions regarding the languages used on the signs. The aim of this article is therefore twofold: on the one hand to compare the signs collected in the two countries in order to see the different ways in which they dealt with this global pandemic; on the other hand, we wanted to explore what the public's reaction was towards the languages used on these signs.

BACKGROUND: THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a Southeast Asian nation of nearly 33 million people. It is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country, with over 130 historical languages[1] (Ethnologue. "Malaysia") being spoken by a population made up of Bumiputra (69.6%: the Malay majority plus other autochthonous ethnic groups, such as the Orang Asli of the Peninsula and the Dayaks of Borneo), Chinese (22.6%) and Indians (6.8%: mostly Tamils) (Department of Statistics. 'Current Population Estimates. Malaysia, 2020, 2021').

The three most visible languages in the Malaysian linguistic landscape are: Malay, the national language; English, once the colonial language, and now the nation's second language, as well as a prestigious international one; and Chinese, which demarks Chinese-owned enterprises. Tamil also features in the linguistic landscape, but less frequently.

By law the Malay language has to appear prominently even on the signs of private enterprises (although this is not always implemented, see for example David and Manan 2015; Manan et al. 2014; Wang and Xu 2018), while English also enjoys high visibility – and in some urbanised areas such as Kuala Lumpur is even more prominent than Malay (Manan et al. 2014; Wang et al. 2017). Different varieties of Chinese are included among Malaysia's larger minority languages, and their visibility is strong mainly because of the Chinese characters that they share when written. The Chinese script is especially visible in the capital and the towns and cities along the Western coast of peninsular Malaysia and in Malaysian Borneo. Tamil, normally written using its traditional script, is most visible in the various Indian neighbourhoods (*Little Indias*) that can be found in most cities along the Western coast (Coluzzi and Kitade 2015; Manan et al. 2014; Wang et al. 2017).

Malay normally appears written in Roman characters (Rumi), but Jawi, the traditional Arabic-derived script, is still sometimes used and indeed is compulsory for shop signs in the north-eastern states of Kelantan and Terengganu (Coluzzi 2020). What is rather peculiar about Malay is that it seems to enjoy rather low prestige among the large non-Malay minority, which tends to result in minimal use of it in the linguistic landscape of 'private' places that are not regulated by law, such as the places of worship. In fact, within places of worship attended exclusively or almost exclusively by one ethnic group (such as Chinese Taoist, Hindu or Sikh temples) the use of the ethnic language (often in combination with English) dominates and clearly marks the space ethnically (Coluzzi and Kitade 2015). As will be shown in this article, this applies to signs related to COVID-19 as well. As far as Chinese is concerned, it is normally written in Chinese characters, but names are often romanised, partly to highlight the ethnic origin of the shop owner, which is in most cases Cantonese or Hokkien; in fact, the same Chinese character is pronounced differently in the various Chinese varieties. The high visibility of Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil can be linked to the size of the ethnic communities speaking

[1] By *historical languages* we mean languages that have been present on the territory for many generations. Therefore, they do not include the languages of recent immigrants.

them, their importance as literary languages, high literacy rates supported by national-type Chinese and Tamil schools, and their status as official languages in China, Taiwan, and Singapore (Chinese), and in Tamil Nadu (India), Sri Lanka, and Singapore (Tamil).

Apart from English, other foreign languages do occasionally appear in the linguistic landscape, particularly in the many shopping malls that dot the country, Italian being probably the most popular among European languages (Coluzzi 2016).

BACKGROUND: THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE IN ITALY

Italy is a southern European nation of a little over 60 million people. Apart from Italian, the national language, over 40 historical languages are spoken in the country (Coluzzi 2009a), twelve of which have been recognized as minority languages. In addition to these, several more languages are spoken by the large number of foreign migrants.

The linguistic landscape in Italy is largely monolingual in Italian, with English appearing on some signs, while other languages that seldom include the local regional or minority languages (apart from the Aosta Valley and South Tyrol) are less common but still enjoy a certain visibility, particularly in some ethnic neighbourhoods (see for example Uberti-Bona 2016). The research carried out by one of the authors in Italy shows that 76% of the units of analysis looked at in Milan and as many as 86% in Udine were in Italian only (Coluzzi 2009b). Out of those units of analysis that were multilingual (but almost always included Italian), 88% in Udine and 97.5% in Milan had English on them, the presence of other languages (Milanese, Friulian, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Slovenian, Croatian, Turkish, Chinese, Latin, and an Indian language) being minimal. In spite of Italy being a multilingual country, the diglossia with Italian as the high variety and the local language as the low variety makes Italian the default language whenever anything is written. On the other hand, the presence of English is mostly due to its high status as an international language, indexing modernity, prestige, and economic opportunities; only a few tourist signs in English have been made specifically for foreigners to read so that their meaning can be clearly understood. This means that generally speaking the target reader for English in bottom-up signs is a local (who may not understand their meaning but can recognize them as written in English), whereas in top-down signs, particularly tourist signs or those on public transport, English is provided for foreigners not living in Italy, i.e. foreigners who cannot speak or are not fluent in Italian. As will be shown, this also applies to the signs related to COVID-19 photographed in Italy.

METHODOLOGY

For this article, 23 different photographs were taken in and around Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya (Malaysia) between the end of December 2020 and the beginning of January 2021 (just before the second MCO began) of any signs that had COVID-19 as their main topic. These ranged from big billboards on the side of the road to small

notices affixed on shops. Some were top-down, i.e. put in place by local or specific authorities such as Rapid Rail Sdn Bhd (Malaysia's public transport systems and services), others were bottom-up, even though always based on an official ruling. As many of these photos were very similar in form and content, a selection was made, and eight were chosen to be the object of analysis for this article on the basis that they showed elements that were deemed to be of interest. 24 similar pictures were taken in Milan (Italy) and the surrounding area (the towns of Cesate and Garbagnate) in April 2021,[2] when some limited movement was allowed during an 'orange' phase of the lockdown.[3] Most of these are relatively small signs and, as in Malaysia, some are top-down and others bottom-up but based on an official ruling. Out of these, seven photos were selected for analysis and comparison. The choice of these two cities was mainly due to practical reasons, as the authors live near Kuala Lumpur and the only person in Italy who could take the pictures in the way we instructed was the brother of one of the two authors, who lives near Milan. In any case, it is likely that signs related to COVID-19 are very similar all over the two countries.

In addition to the photos, a brief survey was carried out at the beginning of May 2021 involving 68 Malaysians and 53 Italians. Surveys were set up on Google Forms – an English version for Malaysia and an Italian version for Italy. Respondents were personal contacts of one of the authors (for Malaysia) and of the other author's brother (for Italy) – friends, relatives, students, etc. – and included all age groups[4] and, as far as Malaysia is concerned, all the main ethnic groups.[5] The languages most spoken by the Malaysian sample were: Malay (85.3%), English (83.8%), Mandarin (44.7%) and Tamil (16.2%), while the languages most spoken by the Italian sample (after Italian) were English, followed by French and Spanish. Considering the tool used and the current situation, obtaining a more balanced sample including all the main user-based variables (gender, social and education background, political leaning, age, etc.) would have proved impossible.

ANALYSIS OF THE MALAYSIAN DATA (LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE)

Three types of signs were identified: what we could call regulatory signs that were easily identifiable through their use of the imperative form; informational signs; and those

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[2] We must acknowledge Gianni Coluzzi's help, who lives in Garbagnate (Milan) and volunteered to take these pictures for us. For the moment, in fact, traveling to Italy and back is difficult due to the periods of quarantine that a traveller must submit to both on arrival in Italy and when going back to Malaysia.

[3] The level of danger. Four colours show the level of danger, from very high to lower: red, orange, yellow, and white.

[4] However, the majority for Malaysia came from the age groups from 21 to 30 (55.9%), whereas for Italy it was the group 41–50 (49%).

[5] Malay 41.2%, Chinese 22.1%, Indian 19.1%. Other smaller minority groups (Kadazan, Sungai, Bisaya, Lundayeh, Bidayuh and one unnamed ethnic group from Sarawak) were also represented with much smaller percentages. A question on ethnic groups was not present in the Italian survey as this category does not exist in Italy, and every citizen is just considered Italian, whatever background he or she might have.

that might be called 'uplifting' signs, written in only two languages: Malay and English, mostly separately. In most cases the signs had drawings or pictures on them besides the writing. Most looked friendly, using rounded fonts and bright colours.

To start with regulatory signs, which form the bulk of the signs recorded, six examples can be seen in Figures 1–6.

Fig. 1. Regulatory sign in English.

The sign in Fig. 1 was photographed in Amcorp Mall, a shopping centre in Petaling Jaya. As with nearly all such signs in shopping complexes, it is written in English, apart from the two sentences in Malay written at the bottom right-hand corner of the poster: 'Selamat Aidilifitri. Maaf zahir dan batin'. Even though it does not have anything to do with the regulations found in the rest of the poster, this was added because Ramadan, the holy month for Muslims, would begin shortly after the beginning of the first lockdown. The two sentences are traditional wishes for Hari Raya, the celebrations at the end of Ramadan: 'Happy Eid. I seek forgiveness [from you] for my physical and emotional [wrongdoings]'. Even though the purpose of this sign was to let customers know what they had to do to avoid catching COVID-19, the sign clearly suggests that Islam is an important religion in the country. Another interesting feature is the emphasis on family ties, as seen in the first drawing at the top.

Fig. 2. Bilingual regulatory sign.

The sign in Fig. 2 is one of the few bilingual signs related to COVID-19 that were found. It says in English and Malay that a mask must be worn in order to be allowed inside the shopping mall Nu Sentral, just in front of KL Sentral train station. The sign can be characterised as duplicating or homophonic (Backhaus 2007, 91–3), saying exactly the same thing in each of the two languages. However, English appears on top even though the two messages are written in the same size and font. As shown in the previous sign, and in all signs found in shopping malls, English appears to be the language of business, particularly for slick international shops and department stores found in most big shopping malls.

Fig. 3. Regulatory sign in Malay.

The sign in Fig. 3 was found in a small version in an LRT station[6] and as a big billboard on the Federal Highway between Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. It is one of the few signs found in Malay, the national language. Apart from the usual recommendations relating to social distance, wearing a mask, and washing or sanitizing hands (this time, interestingly, found at the bottom of the sign only, with the main writing at the top displaying blue and red, the two colours of the Malaysian flag together with white and yellow, which appear underneath), the sign says: 'Sayangi saya, jangan salam', which means something like 'Care for me, don't shake my hand'. This is accompanied by a picture of a boy and a girl greeting each other without any physical contact, just with a hand placed on the heart.[7] Underneath, another sentence, 'Bersama hentikan wabak COVID-19' tells the reader that 'Together we can stop the COVID-19 epidemic'. The need for such a sign was probably prompted by the fact that Malay culture is quite 'physical', i.e. people don't shy away from touching each other, even though normally only people of the same sex.

[6] LRT = Light Rail Transit, one of Kuala Lumpur's urban train lines.

[7] This is actually the final part of the typical Malay greeting, of Middle Eastern origin, whereby a handshake is followed by the placing of the same hand on the heart.

Fig. 4. Regulatory sign in Malay.

Fig. 4 was also found at an LRT station. It is another regulatory sign, mostly in Malay but with the translation in English of the three recommended behaviours at the bottom. Unlike other signs that are quite simple and unsophisticated, this one tries to get the readers involved directly in trying to stop the pandemic. In fact, the main sentence at the top means 'Today the frontliners are us', under which the pictures of ten Malaysians from different ethnic groups and of all walks of life are shown greeting with one hand on the chest (n. 7) and wearing a mask. The idea is that, even though some may think that stopping COVID-19 is the experts' duty, particularly health workers, in reality we are all involved and we have to do our part, by following the simple instructions at the bottom.

Fig. 5. Regulatory sign in English.

Figure 5 was photographed in a large bookstore in a mall underneath the Petronas Twin Towers. It is quite an inventive sign which tries to urge the readers to wash their hands and practice social distance by comparing them with superheroes. A superhero would care for other people and would fight to stop this 'evil', and we should try to emulate her. The colours again, apart from being the same as on Spiderman's costume, also recall the Malaysian flag.

Fig. 6. Regulatory sign in English.

The sign in Fig. 6 was photographed in another of the many shopping malls that dot the city. This sign is of interest as, apart from the detailed instructions at the top with icons showing what to do to prevent catching and spreading COVID-19, it also has the following suggestions on how to greet people without touching them: Salam Malaysia (Malaysian greeting); wave; and nod or bow. The first is more Malay, the second has an international feel, and the third is more Hindu or Buddhist. As far as we can see around us, the second one is the most popular one at the moment.

Figure 7 is the only example found of an informational sign.

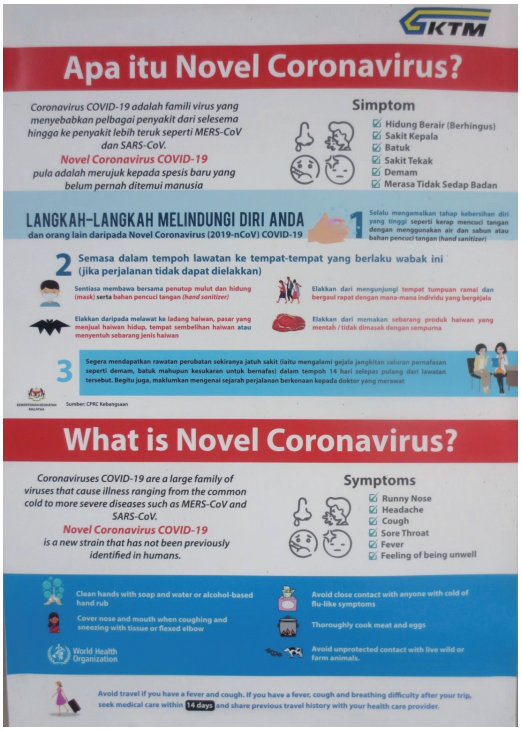

Fig. 7. Bilingual informational sign.

Fig. 7 shows an example of informational sign that was posted in an LRT station. It is bilingual, but this time Malay appears on top, followed by English. In addition, it is a mixed sign (Backhaus 2007, 93–6), meaning that not all the information available in one language is also available in the other language, in this case English. In fact, the English version is shorter, serving as a kind of summary of the part in Malay at the top. The sign outlines COVID-19 and explains what should be done to prevent catching it. This sign also shows that the typology of signs is not always clear-cut – in fact, apart from providing information on COVID-19, this sign is also regulatory, as it tells the readers what they should do. Again, the main colours displayed reflect those found on the Malaysian flag, giving the sign a touch of nationalism, probably to convey the idea that a good Malaysian should follow the directions provided (see also Fig. 3).

As for what we have termed 'uplifting' signs, only one could be found, in the lobby of a condominium in Petaling Jaya.

Fig. 8. Uplifting sign in English.

The sign shown in Fig. 8 is the only sign of this type that was found during our research. For once it does not tell the reader what to do, or explain what the coronavirus is, but just tries to cheer up the tenants in this difficult moment. The picture again shows how important the family is in Malaysian culture. In this particular case the choice of English might be also due to the fact that many foreigners live in this condominium.

ANALYSIS OF THE ITALIAN DATA (LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE)

In Italy, only two types of signs were identified: regulatory signs, and informational signs. As in Malaysia, they were written in only two languages: Italian and English. Unlike in Malaysia, in those rare cases where English was used, it was always accompanied by Italian occupying the prominent position (Scollon and Scollon 2003). In most cases the signs had drawings or pictures on them besides the writing. Most look friendly, but some are quite simple and/or rather 'neutral', with subdued colours such as light green, cyan and blue used on many of them in addition to white (all colours that may recall the sterile ambience of a hospital).

To start with regulatory signs which, similarly to Malaysia, form the bulk of the signs recorded, six examples can be seen in Figs 9–14.

Fig. 9. Regulatory sign in Italian.

The sign in Fig. 9 was displayed behind the window of a bank in Milan. As can be seen, it is extremely detailed, with a long list of suggestions on how COVID-19 can be avoided (in the centre: 'A few simple recommendations to limit the infection from coronavirus'). From top to bottom we can read: 'Wash your hands often with water and soap, and clean the surfaces with disinfectants made of chlorine or alcohol'; 'Avoid crowded places and keep a distance from other people of at least one metre'; 'Do not touch your eyes, nose and mouth with your hands'; 'If you are elderly or immunocompromised stay at home'; 'Avoid handshakes, hugs and sharing bottles and glasses with other people'; 'Cover your mouth and nose with single use tissues when you sneeze or cough, or else use the crook of your arm'; 'If you have flu-like symptoms, stay at home, do not go to emergencies or a medical surgery. Instead get in touch with your GP, your chosen pediatrician, emergency medical service or dial the regional telephone numbers'.

These instructions are comprehensive, even though some of them may be rather culture-related, like the request to avoid handshakes, hugs, and sharing bottles and glasses with other people. Italian culture, in fact, as far as friends and family are concerned, is very much based on physical contact. In particular, kisses on the cheeks are normally exchanged between friends and family of the opposite gender (and sometimes of the same gender as well), which, by the way, might have been one of the causes for the fast spread of the virus.

Fig. 10. Regulatory signs in Italian.

The two small signs in Fig. 10, photographed on the door of a real estate agency in Milan, may be the most common, and the most similar to the signs seen in Malaysia. The sign on the left states: 'Entrance is permitted to no more than two people' (which can be seen as both informational and regulatory), while the one on the right says: 'Information for this shop's customers. Keep a security distance of one metre. Wear a face mask'.

Fig. 11. Regulatory sign in Italian.

The sign in Fig. 11 was posted at the entrance of a pharmacy in Cesate (Milan). It is similar to Fig. 9, being quite detailed, even though the instructions in it are a little different from the ones provided in Fig. 9. It is interesting to notice that here, too, the prevailing colours are cyan and white. From top to bottom we can read: 'For your protection and that of others, remember', 'use a sanitizer', 'keep social distance', 'wear a face mask', 'wear gloves'.

Fig. 12. Bilingual regulatory signs.

Identical signs (Fig. 12) were photographed on an underground train in Milan, and are very similar to those used on the LRT during the first MCO in Malaysia. Unlike all the signs seen so far, these are bilingual in Italian and English, even though English is written in a smaller font and is always second, underneath Italian. The two versions are homophonic however, expressing exactly the same idea. As the underground is the chief means of public transport in Milan, it is used by many foreigners, including tourists. Unlike on other signs, the colours here are bright: yellow, red, and black (for the icon and the writing), probably to attract attention. In fact, red on road signs indicates prohibition, while on traffic lights it calls upon the drivers to stop. On the other hand, yellow stands for warning and caution. These colours in this context clearly warn people to be careful and not to sit.

Fig. 13. Bilingual regulatory sign.

The signs in Fig. 13, found on one of the automatic sliding entrance doors to Garbagnate (Milan) railway station, are in Italian and English. Even though English shares the same font and size as Italian, Italian is still dominant, being on the left hand side (Scollon and Scollon 2003).

Fig. 14. Regulatory signs in Italian stuck on the pavement.

The sign in Fig. 14 is a sticker placed on the pavement in front of the entrance to Garbagnate's hospital to show where people should stand waiting. They enjoin: 'Wait here, keep the security distance'. Whereas in most cases in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya simple adhesive tape was used to indicate where customers should be waiting, in many cases in Italy special stickers were produced such as the one shown in this picture.

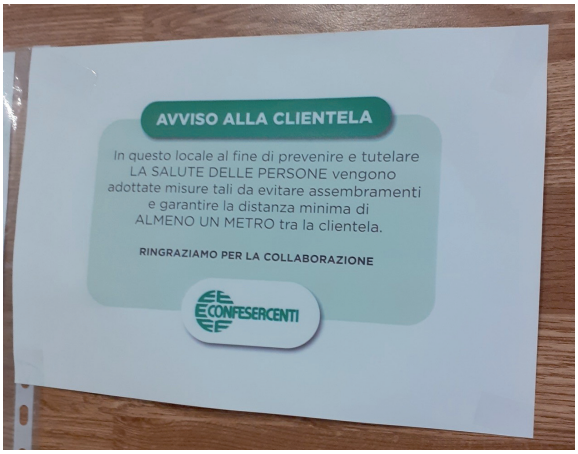

Fig. 15. Informational sign in Italian.

The sign in Fig. 15, the last analyzed in this article, was found inside a shop in Milan. It is very simple – green and white, no drawings, but again quite detailed though short and rather general, with the use of a very formal and 'bureaucratic' style of Italian. It says: 'Attention. In order to protect people's health, in these premises measures have been implemented in order to avoid gatherings and guarantee the minimal distance of one metre among customers. Thank you for your cooperation'.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEYS

The two surveys that were carried out reveal the following results. Starting with Malaysia, to the first question in Part 2 ('Signs related to COVID-19 in public spaces in Malaysia are mostly in English and/or Malay. Are you happy with that?') the answers were divided equally in two halves: 50% declared they were happy with the signs being in English and Malay, whereas the other 50% thought that other languages should be used as well. As for which languages should be added, the majority proposed Chinese and Tamil, separately or together, even though a few suggested other languages, such as those of foreign workers. Interestingly, very few respondents proposed local dialects and/or smaller minority languages, even when these were their first languages. This comes as no surprise, considering the lack of official status and the invisibility of small local languages in the public space.

As far as Italy is concerned, in response to the same question adapted to the Italian situation ('Le scritte relazionate al COVID-19 negli spazi pubblici in Italia sono tutte in italiano, con l'occasionale aggiunta dell'inglese. Vi sembra vada bene così?' – 'Signs related to COVID-19 in public spaces in Italy are all in Italian with the occasional use of English as well. Are you happy with that?'), only 9.4% were happy with the given situation, whereas as many as 62.3% believed that other languages should appear as well. 28.3%, on the other hand, thought that all or most signs should be bilingual in Italian and English. As for the languages that should be added, Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, and French were the most chosen options; the first three being prestigious and widely spoken languages as well as the languages of many immigrants, the last one the prestigious language of a neighbouring country that many in Italy can speak. It is interesting to notice that German – another important neighbouring language, also a minority language in Italy (in the South Tyrol area), and one of the default foreign languages used in the past on tourist signs – was mentioned by only four respondents. Fewer still were the respondents who mentioned the local language, Lombard/Milanese, a non-recognized regional language. Only three respondents mentioned it.

COMPARISON AND DISCUSSION

Even though some of the signs analyzed (and others collected) are very similar in Malaysia and Italy, particularly the regulatory signs recommending the use of face masks, social distance, washing hands, etc., others are quite different.

Perhaps the biggest difference between Malaysia and Italy in terms of the signs used is their spread and visibility, higher in Italy than in Malaysia. Very detailed signs on what to do to avoid contagion were also found in Italy, while their Malaysian counterparts tended to be simpler, albeit perhaps more direct. Obviously signs in public spaces are not the only means used to inform or instruct the population in both countries, and this small case study does not include the information or regulations provided by other media, such as television, radio, newspapers and the internet. Therefore, we can only base our comparison on the signs we collected. In any case, signs related to COVID-19 are more common and more visible in Italy and some provide more information on how to avoid COVID-19 (see for example Fig. 9) than in Malaysia, and this may be due to the much higher number of COVID-19 cases and casualties that Italy suffered until recently,[8] coupled perhaps with a higher allocation of funds for information on COVID-19. It is also interesting to note that, on the whole, the Malaysian signs are more colourful and look a little more 'friendly', besides including examples of creative signs that try to summon up a sense of community (see for example Fig. 4), or of personal commitment (Fig. 5). Some signs even provide suggestions that go beyond the strictly 'medical', such as how to greet without touching (Figs 3 and 6). In this sense, it is also interesting that the only example of an 'uplifting' sign was found in Malaysia.

[8] As we are finalizing this article in May 2021, it seems as if the situation is getting worse in Malaysia.

None of the Italian signs collected tried to reassure the population. Such signs, or signs suggesting behaviour on how to greet without touching for example, might have been deemed too patronizing or ridiculous in Italy.

We have mentioned the colours used, which are on the whole livelier in Malaysia and more subdued in Italy. In some cases, the colours used on signs in Malaysia subtly recall the national flag, perhaps an attempt to stir nationalistic feelings in the readers: 'we are all Malaysians and we must do our best for the good of the Country and for the wellbeing of all citizens'. In Italy, no signs were found where the colours of the Italian flag – green, white and red – were present. On the other hand, the light green/cyan and white found in more than one sign recall hospitals and clinics, being common colours in those places. Perhaps the rationale behind this choice was two-fold – on the one hand an attempt to be nurturing: 'we are caring for you as a hospital would' (these colours are also normally considered soothing and calming); on the other hand they might have tried to 'frighten' the readers: 'do as you are told or else you may end up in hospital!'.

Whether or not all these differences are related to the different spread of COVID-19 and the number of casualties in the two countries at the time they were produced and posted, it seems to us that another reason behind these differences may have to do with the general official attitude towards COVID-19. In Italy, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, very negative images and information on COVID-19 were ubiquitous in the media, which were quite sensationalistic on the one hand, but also perhaps portrayed the idea that if people were not scared enough, they would not abide by the rules of staying at home and following strict social distancing, particularly during the first lockdown. Perhaps Malaysians are seen as more law-abiding, and not in need of such 'threats'. Perhaps it was thought that positive reinforcement would be more productive in Malaysia. If this is true, this might also reflect different mindsets in Asia and Europe, with a stronger social sense and respect for authorities in the first, and a stronger individualism and sense of personal 'freedom' in the second.[9] Another element that is perhaps worth highlighting is the centrality of family[10] and religion in Malaysia, which was reflected in the drawings of families, and in the Eid wishes added to the sign in Fig. 1. This might have also been an attempt to cheer up the readers, whether Muslim or not, as the wishes may have also conveyed the idea that life continues as usual, that we can be happy and celebrate our festivals in spite of the lockdown.

Another difference between the two countries is in the languages used. It is true that the signs in both countries feature only the national language (Malay in Malaysia and

[9] These statements have been made based on the personal experiences and observations of the two authors, one an Italian who has lived in Southeast Asia for the past 15 years and the other a Malaysian who has studied in France where she obtained her PhD.

[10] Obviously the family is very important in the Italian culture, too. However, with increasing individualisation and modernisation one may argue that it does not hold the centrality that it used to enjoy, at least in the big cities of the North. The signs and posters recorded seem to confirm this.

Italian in Italy)[11] and English, but the proportion in which these two languages are used is completely different. In Malaysia, English is the country's second language, a widespread lingua franca used especially among educated people (Asmah Omar 1987, 1992, 2003; Azirah Hashim 2009), and a prestigious international language widely used in the media and in the business world; Malay on the other hand is the ethnic language of the Malay majority and Malaysia's only official language, used mostly in official media and documents and, as a lingua franca, among less educated people whose level of English may be quite low, and mostly in the presence of at least one Malay speaker (Omar 2003, 74, 121, 164). English was seen more in bottom-up signs found in shopping malls for example; Malay appeared more often on top-down signs, such as in train stations, often accompanied by English (bilingual signs). However, our survey shows that only half of the respondents are happy with this and do not think that more languages are necessary. The other half think that more languages should be used, starting with those of the two largest minority ethnic groups in Malaysia, the Chinese and the Tamils. Interestingly, nobody thought that the signs should be exclusively in Malay or English, showing the multilingual attitudes of most Malaysians.

As explained above, the Italian linguistic landscape is largely monolingual – Italian is the prestigious state language that all Italians and most foreigners in Italy speak fluently, and use in most domains, especially written ones. In spite of this, the Italian respondents surveyed in this study (at least the most progressive ones)[12] seem to share the Malaysians' multilingual attitude – but in Italy's case this is oriented towards other countries and foreign people, particularly towards immigrants from northern Africa, Latin America, and China, not towards the historical Italian minorities or the local languages. In fact, the most mentioned languages that, according to these respondents, should be added to English are Arabic, Chinese, and Spanish. This request for multilingualism on COVID-19 signs was actually greater in Italy than in Malaysia, and conversely the percentage of those who believed that Italian and some English would suffice was quite low (while, like in Malaysia, nobody thought that the signs should be in the national language only). Nearly one third of the Italian respondents believed that more English should be used on signs, not only on the few top-down signs that use it now, although always accompanied by Italian in the dominant position.

CONCLUSIONS

Our research has shown that many local factors do influence the way signs are produced and displayed, even when they are meant to deal with exactly the same problem – in

[11] In some cases, a rather stilted bureaucratic style of Italian was observed on some Italian signs. This may be a reflection of what has been called *burocratese*, a style of language difficult to understand, but which still enjoys a certain level of prestige for the idea that simple equals low class and low education, and complicated equals high class and high culture.

[12] Most probably, my brother has no or very few right-wing contacts.

this case the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be interesting to see how other countries have dealt with COVID-19 on the signs displayed in their linguistic landscape.[13]

The other point that has been shown in this article is that using only the national official languages and perhaps some English on signs may not be deemed enough by the population. What has been shown in the analysis above is once again a reflection of what one of the two authors affirmed in a previous article on the linguistic landscape (Coluzzi 2012): States tend to be monolingual (or bilingual with English), whereas their citizens tend to be multilingual. Nobody seems to oppose the use of the national language and English, but a good part of the population would like to see more languages being used in the linguistic landscape, whether theirs, those of minorities, or foreign languages. Some (particularly politicians in power and legislators) may think that, facing an emergency such as the one the world is going through at the moment, it is not the right time to consider the linguistic rights of the population. Their idea of language is strictly practical and communicative, with a tinge of nationalism – citizens are supposed to know the official national language, so that should suffice. English can be added for foreigners, or for people who are not fluent in the national language, or simply because it gives an aura of importance to the message, for something that is as 'international' and important as the COVID-19 pandemic. As already stated, our survey shows that many people do think more languages should be used, whether because they cherish the local languages and want them to be more visible and respected, or because they are concerned with the needs and rights of elderly people (who may not be proficient in the national language) and/or foreigners, whether they are expats or immigrants. In addition, we may add, beyond nationalistic feelings, the use of more languages would also ensure that nobody is left behind, that everybody understands the messages shown clearly and without any ambiguities.

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[13] As a matter of fact, shortly after this article was finalized, an interesting workshop was held online on 'The linguistic landscape of COVID-19' (18 June 2021, https://www.covidsigns.net/programme). Unfortunately, the presentations made are not publicly available, but by looking at the titles, it seems as if some of their authors carried out research similar to ours in other parts of the world: Sudan, South Korea, Australia, Eswatini, Sweden, Greece, USA, France, Finland, Nepal, Pakistan, UK, Hong Kong, China. Italy was also included, but the title of the presentations did not make clear exactly where the research was carried out.

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COVID-19 w krajobrazie językowym Włoch i Malezji

Słowa kluczowe: COVID-19, Włochy, krajobraz językowy, Malezja, postawy językowe.

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł porusza temat znaków, które pojawiły się w krajobrazie językowym w Malezji i we Włoszech od czasu wprowadzenia w obu krajach – w marcu 2020 roku – ograniczeń związanych z pandemią. Badanie podzielono na dwie główne części: jedną analizującą zebrane znaki, a drugą analizującą odpowiedzi udzielone przez obywateli Malezji lub Włoch w ramach ankiety dotyczącej języków użytych w tych znakach. W artykule, po ogólnym omówieniu kryzysu COVID-19 w obu krajach, przedstawiono krajobraz językowy w Malezji i Włoszech oraz zastosowaną metodologię. Następnie przeanalizowano zarówno znaki, jak i odpowiedzi ankietowe. W części poświęconej dyskusji porównano znaki oraz odpowiedzi respondentów w obu krajach. Chociaż niektóre z analizowanych znaków są bardzo podobne w Malezji i we Włoszech (zwłaszcza znaki regulacyjne zalecające używanie masek na twarz, zachowanie dystansu społecznego, mycie rąk itp.), to inne znaki okazały się wyraźnie odmienne. Przykładowo: we Włoszech oznaczenia są bardziej widoczne i szczegółowe, podczas gdy w Malezji okazują się bardziej barwne. W niektórych przypadkach kolory używane na niektórych znakach w Malezji subtelnie przypominają flagę narodową (czerwoną, niebieską, białą i żółtą), podczas gdy jasnozielony/cyjan i biały można znaleźć na wielu znakach we Włoszech. Jeśli chodzi o języki pojawiające się na oznaczeniach związanych z COVID-19, w obu krajach umieszczono tylko język narodowy (malajski w Malezji i włoski we Włoszech) i angielski, ale angielski jest znacznie bardziej widoczny w Malezji niż we Włoszech.