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Writing System Mimicry in the Linguistic Landscape

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1. Introduction

The study of the linguistic landscape of cities, introduced by Landry and Bourhis (1997), has so far attended to a variety of different uses of written language in the public sphere. One use it has yet to address in significant detail is what I term *writing system mimicry*, and it is the principal aim of this paper to begin to address this gap.

Writing system mimicry will be defined in more detail in Section 3, but may be loosely described as the choice to make a text in one writing system superficially resemble text in another. Figure 1 is an example of this from West London, in which the word <bollywood>[1] (written in Latin script and clearly intended to be read as English) mimics certain features and graphemes of the Devanagari script, e.g. the horizontal connecting bar and the grapheme <ठ> /ʈ^h/ that resembles Latin <o>.

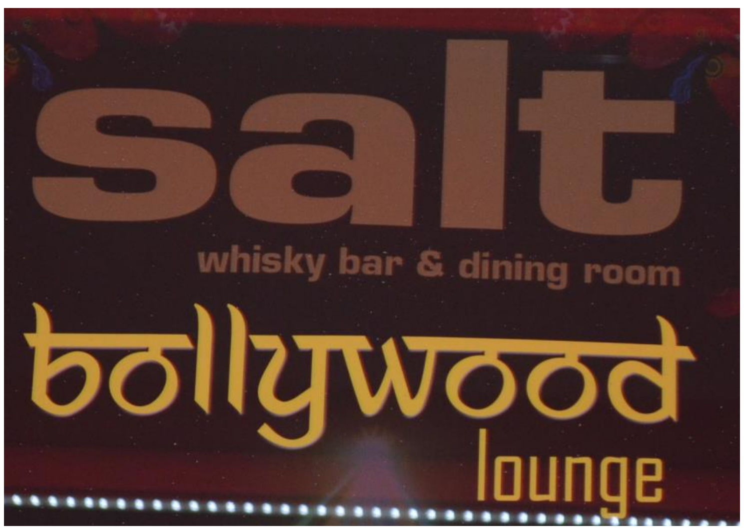


Figure 1: A typical example of writing system mimicry.[2]

In this paper I investigate the possibility that the choice to mimic another writing system may have a sociolinguistic explanation. In particular, I attempt to find answers to the following:

1. How have various academic fields and non-academic discourses described and accounted for writing system mimicry?
2. How might it fit into existing theories and frameworks of linguistic landscape studies?

[1] Throughout this article, I use the following standard transcription conventions: /phonemic/, [phonetic] and <orthographic>.
[2] Source for all figures: the author.

3. What is the extent of writing system mimicry in the linguistic landscape?
4. What methodological issues arise, and areas for further research become apparent, following initial research?

First I give an overview of the focus and some key findings of linguistic landscape studies so far (Section 2). Then I formulate a working definition of writing system mimicry (Section 3). I address question 1 with a summary of academic and non-academic mentions of the phenomenon (Section 4), and present the findings from a survey of the linguistic landscape of London (Section 5). Finally, I address questions 2, 3 and 4 with a discussion (Section 6) and conclusions and further research questions (Section 7).

2. Overview of the linguistic landscape literature

Linguistic landscape, at a basic definition, refers to the "linguistic objects that mark the public space" (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006: 7). Typically this has meant studying signs, but recent attempts to widen linguistic landscape research to include virtual and mobile spaces (e.g. the internet) have expanded its scope (Kasanga 2012). The term is thought to have originated with Landry and Bourhis (1997), although Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) research into language choice in Jerusalem was pioneering. Linguistic landscape study is one area of the flourishing field of the sociolinguistics of writing (see Lillis 2013; Sebba 2012), in which written language is seen no longer as neutral but as reflecting and defining sociolinguistic relationships.

2.1. Dichotomies of agency

Since the introduction of the term, two dichotomies that often run parallel have both been used productively and criticised for their lack of nuance. These are *top-down/bottom-up* and *official/non-official*. They highlight the important roles of the *agents* of a sign: those who enact control over it, also referred to as *authorship* (Malinowski 2009).

Top-down refers to "elements used and exhibited by institutional agencies which in one way or another act under the control of local or central policies" (note the explicit reference to language planning and policy, normally perceived of as top-down, with its terminology). Bottom-up elements, on the other hand, are "utilised by individual, associative or corporative actors who enjoy autonomy of action within legal limits" (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006: 10), and tend to include all manner of non-governmental social organisations and corporations. Generally (although this may not always be the case) top-down authorship is synonymous with official use, and bottom-up with non-official use.

On the one hand, these dichotomies have been informative. Genuine differences are often found between the uses of street signs employed by top-down/official contexts and bottom-up/non-official actors. The former tend to be much more regular, reflecting the language practises of the dominant linguistic group in the country, while non-official signs are much less regulated (Backhaus 2006), tending to reflect *solidarity* with others of the same ethnolinguistic (often minority) background in cities (Spolsky and Cooper 1991) through the incorporation of groups' language(s) (Huebner 2006).

However, they have been criticised for over-simplifying the relationships agents have with each other. They imply a two-tier hierarchy in which both major corporations and

fly-posters (two extremes of the bottom-up actors) are seen as equal. Not only might major corporations have considerably more control over signage than fly-posters, they may be actually more powerful than governments in this respect (Huebner 2009), reflecting the transfer of power from governments to corporations as a product of globalisation. Far from enjoying "autonomy of action within legal limits", bottom-up actors are sometimes subject to further constraint, especially by governments who wish to control an ethnic minority, or by city planners who wish to alter how an area is perceived. An example of the latter, blurring the lines between actors, is reported by Lou (2010). She finds that the high presence of Chinese glyphs on business signs in Chinatown, Washington D.C., is due to a combined higher corporate (non-official) and government (official) language planning that attempts to maintain the Chinese character of the area.

2.2. Agents and audiences

In their groundbreaking research into languages of historic and present Jerusalem, Spolsky and Cooper (1991: 81-85) formulated three conditions for writing in certain languages but not others on public signs. Essentially they state that choice of language is dependent upon the agents and audiences: a sign is written in a language known to the agent(s), presumed to be understood by the audience(s), and in a language by which the agent wishes to be identified. As Backhaus (2007) notes, the first two are based on practicality, while the third has a distinct social and political basis. The latter two considerations have had particular importance in conceiving the development of linguistic landscape studies as a field.

Given that the linguistic landscape is dominated by advertising in some form or another (Leeman and Modan 2010; Spolsky 2009), it is vital that audience be considered for practical purposes. Audiences are inherently multiple, making it difficult for agents to conceive how their signs may be viewed, and how effective they may be at delivering the intended message.

The assertion that agents consider how they wish to be identified, and thus express themselves symbolically in solidarity with their ethnolinguistic group through language on signs, has been many times validated since then (see, for example, Part IV of Shohamy and Gorter 2009).

2.3. Focuses

Generally, studies have focused on power relations between ethnic groups, in particular ethnic minorities' linguistic vitality in the landscape as indexing their local sociolinguistic status. In terms of the geographic regions, studies have been fairly sporadic depending on researchers' locations and interests, but tending to focus on urban areas. Studies of the British Isles so far appear to be limited to Ireland and Northern Ireland (Kallen 2009; Kallen and Ní Dhonnacha 2010).

2.4. Methodologies

Methodologies have so far been fairly consistent, involving photographing signs or groups of signs in an area, coding them for significant features, and making statistical comparisons to draw conclusions about the relationships between ethnolinguistic groups. While this has yielded some interesting results, it essentially ignores the agents' actual considerations when making the signs, something addressed by a special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (Zabrodskaja and Milani 2014)

entitled 'Signs in Context'. The push towards qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews is exemplified by Malinowski's (2009) conversations with Korean business owners.

3. Working definition of writing system mimicry

The term *typographic mimicry*, as coined by Coulmas (2014), provides a useful starting point for my definition of writing system mimicry. This was a first attempt at defining the concept for sociolinguistic purposes, after having found no mentions elsewhere (Coulmas p.c., December 2014). Despite disliking a proliferation of terms in academic literature, I choose not to continue with the word 'typographic'. It usually refers to the act of arranging type, and is therefore too broad for current purposes, as it could reference any design elements of typography. The mimicry of Devanagari in Figure 1 is of very specific features of the script, rather than just any design elements. 'Script' could be used instead of 'typographic', covering many common examples of mimicry (e.g. faux-Arabic, faux-Cyrillic, faux-Devanagari), however that would exclude mimicry of another language that uses the same script but a different orthography, e.g. the grapheme <ö> in the logo of the heavy metal band Motörhead. Therefore the term 'writing system', defined according to Coulmas (2003: 35, first definition) as being "of an individual language" is preferred.

Coulmas (2014: 18) notes that design features being mimicked are salient to the mimicker – they are "conspicuous features" that distinguish the mimicked writing system from the base writing system. They may be real features of the writing system, or may be imagined by the mimicker, potentially indicating stereotypes held about the writing system. The 'base writing system' here is the lens through which the text is intended to be read (English in Figure 1). It is taken for granted that phonetic properties of graphemes mimicked are ignored, although it is possible that that may not always be the case.

With this in mind, I propose the following definition of writing system mimicry:

> The mapping of (real or imagined) design features and/or graphemes of a mimicked writing system onto a base writing system, so that the base writing system somewhat resembles the mimicked writing system while retaining legibility.

4. Mentions elsewhere: discourse analysis and literature review

4.1. Overview and methodology

This section is an overview of current terminology for, and explanations of, writing system mimicry. This takes the form of two methods: a brief discourse analysis of English-language internet websites and a cross-disciplinary academic literature review. The (limited) discourse analysis is intended to identify some non-academic or 'folk' terms and explanations for the phenomenon, while the literature review aims to assess how it has been treated in various academic fields. It is hoped that the findings from non-academic discourse may inform present and future research by scholars.

There are some important things to clarify from the outset. A first is that this research is exploratory: mentions and explanations are scattered in both surveys, suggesting that it has not been systematically assessed before. This informed the methodology, because due to the lack of a standard term, I had to employ a scattergun/snowball approach to

search terms on internet search engines and academic journal databases. For example, at one point it became clear that in the discourse the term *faux Cyrillic* was used to describe Latin-script text that mimicked the Cyrillic script, at which point I searched using this and derived terms (e.g. *faux Arabic, faux Chinese*) in both locations. This method was productive in that it enabled me to slowly identify which terms were in common use, but it obviously means that research could never be 'complete', as it is likely that more terms (and interpretations) exist, and furthermore, it limits my corpus to the English language. More specifically, for non-academic discourse I searched through the first 20 or 30 entries on popular search engine Google[3], and used Primo Central[4] for academic journal searches.

A second issue is that although this paper focuses on the linguistic landscape, writing system mimicry is not restricted to this domain. Several of the academic articles that appeared in the literature review analyse instances of writing system mimicry that do not form part of a classic linguistic landscape survey, e.g. product branding (Kurland 2004; McMichael 2009) and online communications (Miller 2011).

4.2. Academic and 'folk' terms

Despite (or perhaps because of) the lack of a standardised term for this phenomenon, various terms are identifiable. These include:

- *Faux x,* with *x* being either the name of the script mimicked or the language typically associated with the writing system. Examples of the former include *faux Cyrillic* (Know Your Meme 2014; McMichael 2009), *faux Devanagari* (Chachra 2014) and *faux Runic* (Page Studio Graphics 2015), and examples of the latter include *faux Russian* (Kurland 2004), *faux Arabic* and *faux Japanese* (Page Studio Graphics 2015).
- *Foreign look font* (Dafont 2015a);
- *Ethnic type* (Shaw 2009);
- *Mimicry typefaces* (Wikipedia 2015);
- *Wonton font* (Dafont 2015b) and *Chop Suey font* (Yang 2012) for the Chinese script;
- *Pseudoscript* (Coulmas 2014; Patel 2005);
- *Typographic mimicry* (Coulmas 2014).

All but one of these (typographic mimicry) refers to the product of the phenomenon rather than the phenomenon itself, implying that there is some kind of standard process for creation, and more-or-less uniform degrees of implementation.

4.3. Interpretations

4.3.1. From discourse analysis

Internet discourse repeatedly offers two themes of discussion: that it is a marketing tool, and that it relies on stereotypes.The terms *wonton font* and *Chop Suey font* (above) are both named after popular Chinese foods in the west, indicating an association with Chinese restaurants. This is corroborated by design historian Shaw (2009), who adds that it may be necessary as an advertising strategy: "fail to use this kind of lettering and

[3] http://www.google.com
[4]http://mlplus.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo_library/libweb/

you run the risk of being overlooked … so there's a commercial incentive for takeout places to use this kind of typeface" (quoted in Yang 2012). A commenter on the same article concurs, saying that it is "designed to get customers". Seemingly contradictorily, given that it is unlikely that business owners would wish for their businesses to be portrayed negatively, writing system mimicry is at the same time seen by many potential customers as relying on negative stereotypes (see Shaw 2009). These are especially prominent when coupled with Chinese caricatures (see Strasburg 2002; Coulmas 2014: 18), causing some to accuse it of being a racist practice (Yang 2012, especially comments section).

4.3.2. From literature review

Findings from the literature review generally support the suggestions in the discourse analysis, in addition demonstrating evidence that writing system mimicry has an identity function.

Foreign branding is a marketing strategy used by businesses to draw attention to the foreignness (particularly the connection to a place) of their product, because specific products have positive associations with their country or region of origin. Kurland (2004) studied American consumers' perceptions of Russian vodka by manipulating two variables on the branding: the incorporation of the word 'Russian' and the writing system used. Participants favoured vodka that called itself Russian, unsurprisingly; interestingly for our purposes, out of the three writing systems (Latin, Cyrillic, and mimicked Cyrillic) they favoured mimicked Cyrillic, followed by Latin and then real Cyrillic. This can be explained as follows: real Cyrillic is "too confusingly unfamiliar to be found appealing" (Kurland 2004: no page), while a mimicked Cyrillic font occupies a comfortable middle ground between legibility and authentic Russianness.

Although not directly referencing writing system mimicry, the following comments from Leeman and Modan's (2010: 92) analysis of advertising in the linguistic landscape are illustrative:

> The use of a 'foreign' language as a selling point is heightened when that language has a different orthography from the language of the target consumer [...] For a viewer of an unfamiliar orthography, the linguistic valence of the writing system becomes backgrounded, and the aesthetic qualities become more salient [...] [which can be] capitalized on through font design.

In Kurland's study, the "font design" of branding on the vodka was more important than the "linguistic valence of the writing system".

Evidence to suggest that it perpetuates negative stereotypes is rarer. McMichael (2009:339) negatively describes the use of "faux-Cyrillic" on a late Soviet Russian album released for US audiences as a "cultural cliché", implying that some potential buyers or fans of the band may be put off by its over-stereotyping through mimicking Cyrillic.

The remainder of the references in academic sources discuss how writing system mimicry is a symbol of group identity – ethnic and social. A survey of the linguistic landscapes of three cities in Maharashtra, India, found combined Devanagari and Latin

scripts on shop fronts. Rubdy (2013: 44) categorises this as an example of *language mixing*, calling it an expression of *hybrid identity* that “[enables] them to navigate between global identification and local cultural practices”. In this context, the global is expressed by indexing English, and the local by indexing Marathi. The desire to express multiple identities through writing is also stated by Patel (2005), who highlights font design students’ attempts to create fonts that might be used by Indian diasporas that identify with multiple cultures.

Similarly, American Jews’ mimicry of the Hebrew script in local flyers enables the diaspora to maintain a relationship with its own heritage. Similarly to the Russian-branded vodka example above, writing system mimicry enables the post-vernacular American-Jewish community (and those outside of it) to read text that looks distinctively Hebrew without being able to read the Hebrew script, or as Shandler (2006: 156, quoted in Benor 2009: 251) puts it, “[marking] the words as distinctively Jewish while integrating them into a more widely familiar communicative code”.

A final example of group identity is found in Japan through what is termed by Miller (2011) *girl graphs*. This is the substitution of Japanese graphs with certain symbols and graphs from other scripts (especially Greek and Cyrillic letters that bear a resemblance to them). As the name suggests, it is done by young girls, partially to reaffirm group identity but also to subvert mainstream orthographic expectations.

4.4. Summary

A review of academic and non-academic discussions of writing system mimicry identifies the following. There is no uniform term for it, either in academic or non-academic discourses. Its use as an advertising or marketing tool is recognised in both surveys. It is perceived by some to perpetuate negative stereotypes, while in academia sporadic mentions have been made of its connection to identity. Not enough evidence yet exists to make broad claims about the truth of any of these, and connections to established sociolinguistic research areas are impoverished. I now turn to an account of a linguistic landscape survey of London.

5. Survey of the linguistic landscape of London (UK)

5.1. Background

Between December 2014 and January 2015, I conducted an on-foot survey of signs in several limited geographic areas within London’s city centre. It is my understanding that this may be the first sociolinguistic survey of London’s linguistic landscape, as I am unable to find any others. London has a long and rich history of immigration that has resulted in an abundance of multilingual signage, with specific areas being home to specific ethnic minorities. The survey aims to assess the prevalence of writing system mimicry in an urban city, and to act as a basis from which further similar research might develop.

5.2. Methodology

This survey generally followed the methodologies of other classic linguistic landscape studies (e.g. Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). Despite the clearly important role of agency in writing system mimicry, I did not choose to conduct interviews because in this initial survey I felt it was important to answer more basic questions, in particular how prevalent the phenomenon is, before researching in detail the motivations involved.

For each geographic area I would count and tally every relevant sign unit, coding them according to category of business they appeared on, and I would take photographs of every instance of what appeared to be writing system mimicry on these sign units (assessing the truth of these judgments afterwards). This provided me with essentially as complete as necessary a data set of each geographic area, enabling me to calculate writing system mimicry as a percentage of all relevant sign units. A pilot survey was done first to iron out initial methodological issues.

Definitions for the previous paragraph are:

- Sign unit. Following Hult (2009), every store front equalled one unit, including in that definition signs or groups or signs for businesses not at street level. I included all writing visible at the store front, including menus, the names of objects being sold and advertisements. Store fronts were counted rather than individual signs as first, the latter would be too much over several geographic areas, and secondly, it was assumed that a store front reflected the decisions of one or a group of agents working collaboratively to make decisions about how the business is perceived (see Section 2.2).
- What to tally. Unlike most linguistic landscape surveys, which often look for signs of ethnic groups' written language vitality and function, I was looking for a particular feature of minority (immigrant) language use. Therefore I only tallied units that showed signs of being owned by, or providing a service to, ethnic minorities. Due to some ambiguous examples in the pilot, I chose only to tally units that demonstrated the minority's language in some form, either in the original or mimicked writing system or a Latin transliteration. I chose to focus on the dominant minority for each area because I wanted to find out if some immigrant groups are more likely to use writing system mimicry than others. Without approaching the owners of individual stores (not feasible due to time constraints on the research), this unfortunately involved approximating which ethnic group owned which store (to be discussed later).
- Choice of geographic areas. Geographic areas were chosen that had a dominant immigrant minority, and where the language had a significant visual presence in the local linguistic landscape. This could be a street or a network of streets. Some places (e.g. Chinatown and Brick Lane) were initially selected through my own folk knowledge about their ethnic composition, which was confirmed through figures available from the latest UK census (Nomis 2014). Because street-level census data is not available, postcode area data had to be used, which is assumed to equate approximately to business ownership in the local area. The dominant immigrant minorities were selected based on having a uniform non-Latin script for their language(s).
- Coding units. Based on evidence from the literature and discourse analysis about the importance of audience and advertising in writing system mimicry and the

linguistic landscape, I decided to code for two broad categories of commercial outlets, again aiming to see if there is a difference in the prevalence of writing system mimicry. Such assumptions are not without objection, but had to be made on the basis that: there is no standard coding system used in historic linguistic landscape studies; I was not able to approach individual stores for information about their customers; and that this research was preliminary and exploratory. The two categories coded were:

  - Eateries. These were any sit-down or takeaway food or drinks establishments whose primary products associated with the ethnic group's culture. It was assumed that these, of all commercial types, were most likely to be aimed at those outside the ethnic group.
  - Other services. This encapsulated a wide range of commercial and cultural activity centres including ethnic grocery stores, religious buildings, massage parlours, clothing stores and travel agents. It was assumed that these were mostly frequented by those within the ethnic group.

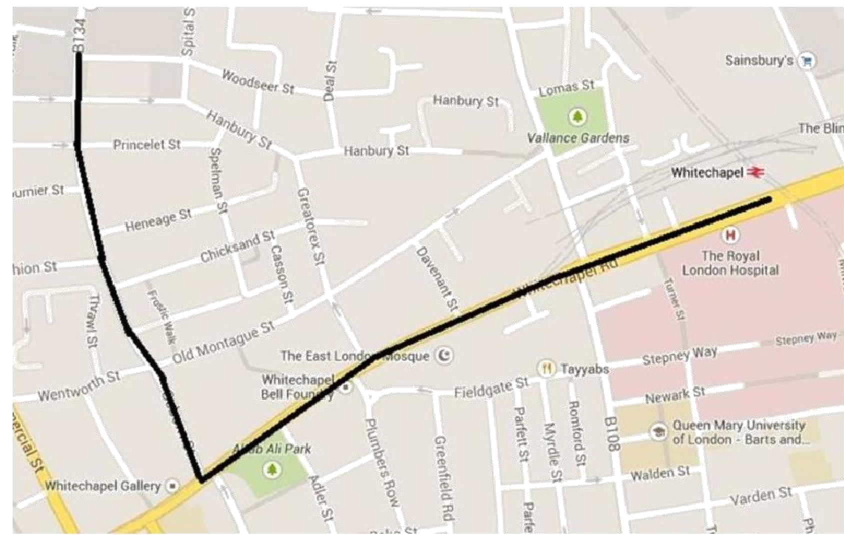
- Identifying writing system mimicry. Despite the working definition, this became an issue at the analysis stage (at which point I erred on the side of caution, only including results that I was certain of), but at the time of data collection I decided to photograph all instances of suspected mimicry.

The three geographic areas chosen for the survey were (speaker data from Nomis 2014):

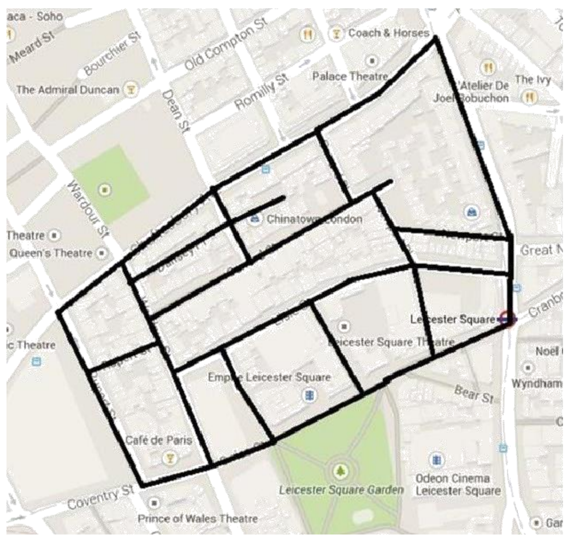
- East London (Brick Lane and surrounding areas, popularly referred to as 'Banglatown'). 13% are speakers of Bengali/Sylheti/Chatgaya (Chittagonian) as a main language (all in the Bengali-Assamese branch of the Indo-Aryan language family, typically written with the Bengali script). Postcode areas: E11/E12/E15/E16. 2.44km surveyed.
- Central London ('Chinatown'). 4.4% are speakers of a Chinese language (written using Chinese glyphs) as a main language. Postcode areas: W1D5/W1D6/WC2H7/WC2H0. 2.17km surveyed.

  West London. 6.6% are speakers of Arabic (using Arabic script) as a main language. Postcode areas: W21/W22. 1.08km surveyed.

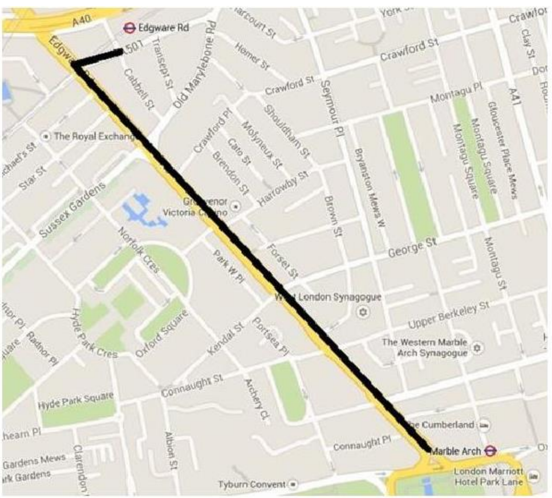
Maps 1-3 illustrate the extent of each geographical area. Roads surveyed are highlighted with a thick black line. The total area surveyed was 5.7km.



Map 1: East London survey area. Source: Google (2015).



Map 2: Central London survey area. Source: Google (2015).



Map 3: West London survey area. Source: Google (2015).

It is important to note some features of these areas. Two short sections of the East London area (a stretch of Whitechapel Road and Watney Market), in addition to having regular shops, are host to daytime markets catering primarily for the Bangladeshi diaspora. These had to be ignored for consistency – none of the other areas had them – but such markets might exhibit different patterns of language use. Additionally, the Brick Lane area of East London and the entire Central London area are famous for their restaurants as tourist attractions, with the latter especially catering to theatre- and cinema-goers.

5.3. Results

In total, 513 shop fronts were counted, of which 21 (4.1%) exhibited signs of writing system mimicry, with representation in every geographic area and business type surveyed, indicating consistently moderate use throughout. See Table 1 for full details. The Appendix contains all instances of relevant writing system mimicry documented, including information about geographic area, business category, the mimicked writing

system, and any limitations to the extent of mimicry. An overview of some of the distinctive features of the results follows.

Table 1: Prevalence of writing system mimicry in surveyed London areas.

	Eateries		Other services		Total	
	No mimicry	Mimicry	No mimicry	Mimicry	No mimicry	Mimicry
East London (*n*=225)	78	5 (6.0%)	138	4 (2.8%)	216	9 (4.0%)
Central London (*n*=172)	89	4 (4.3%)	78	1 (1.3%)	167	5 (2.9%)
West London (*n*=116)	32	6 (15.8%)	77	1 (1.3%)	109	7 (6.0%)
Total (*n*=513)	199	15 (7%)	293	6 (2.0%)	492	21 (4.1%)

For every area, mimicry occurred more in eateries than in other services. Mimicry within each area ranged between 2.9% and 6%. The areas displayed some internal differences. Of particular note is that over 15% of the relatively few Arabic-language eateries in West London exhibited mimicry, which is considerably more than in the other areas. However, three of these were restaurants owned by the same company 'Maroush' (see Appendix). Counting only one of those instances instead of all three – as the primary actor (business owner) is presumably the same across the chain – the percentage is lowered to 11.1%, which is still much higher than other areas. The East London area exhibited considerably more writing system mimicry in the north (top Map 1, which includes Brick Lane and Whitechapel Road) than in the south (bottom Map 1).

In terms of the languages mimicked, Arabic dominates the data. West London (Arabic-dominant) mimicked only the Arabic script. Central London mimicked predominantly the Chinese script (with the exception of Manchu on a Manchurian restaurant). Strikingly, only one East London example mimicked the Bangla script, while the rest mimicked Arabic. Finally, although this was not initially coded for, analysis reveals that every instance of writing system mimicry was a very prominent sign on the store front, with all but one being the business name itself.

6. Discussion

In this section I consider everything mentioned so far in a discussion of my findings. I first address the results of the survey and the literature review, and then highlight methodological concerns and attempt to contextualise these results within the linguistic landscape literature.

The prevalence of writing system mimicry across London not only validates it as a phenomenon worth studying, but suggests that the potential deterrent of negative stereotyping (identified in Section 4.3) may not be strong. The prominent size of such signs also suggests that where it is employed it is done so very purposefully, either for advertising or identity purposes, or both.

That it is present in eateries more than non-eateries could be due to advertising - the business owners may wish to target those outside the ethnolinguistic group - or it could

be an act of solidarity with other members of the group, if eateries are considered to be a more communal space within that culture.

The dominance of Arabic in the data in general – both in terms of the quantity of mimicry in West London and the use of Arabic mimicry by Bangladeshi East London – deserves further research. A simple possible answer is that perhaps Arabic is deemed to be easy to mimic, and is therefore more incorporable into font design than other writing systems, although this does not explain its use in East London. According to census data (Nomis 2014), only 0.5% of the population in the East London area report speaking Arabic as their main language, so it is not likely that writing system mimicry here expresses a language they use. It may, however, express a language they identify with but not speak. Fairly similarly to American Jews' use of Hebrew to express identity (Benor 2009), the predominantly Muslim Bangladeshis may identify with Arabic writing because of religious association with the Qur'an. This is supported by the use of writing system mimicry with words that evoke Arab or religious associations: 'Arabian', 'Aladin', and especially 'bismillah' ('in the name of Allah') (see Appendix, Table 2).The pairing of the Arabic script with Islam is perhaps most visually explicit in the West London Syrian restaurant 'Abu Zaad' (Figure 2), in which features of the Arabic script are combined with stylised minarets. A strong connection of language to culture through religion may indeed explain the dominance of Arabic mimicry in West London eateries, though not fully.

Figure 2: Incorporating religious iconography.

In predominantly Chinese Central London, one example of mimicry that was not included in the data (as non-Chinese agency was assumed), but was still initially photographed, was a very overt example of mimicking a different writing system. Figure 2 shows a Vietnamese restaurant, the sign for which mimics the Chinese script. It can be assumed that the sign-makers did not consider the audience to know that Vietnamese does not use Chinese characters. Why, though, incorporate Chinese at all? It could be a marketing motivation, to associate with the 'Chineseness' of the surrounding restaurants. If the owners are Vietnamese, it may be the case that here, the desire to advertise overrides the desire to express identity through writing. Alternatively, the owners could be ethnically Chinese (from Vietnam or elsewhere), wishing to identify as such through their business sign.

Figure 3: Mimicry of another writing system.[5]

Another example in Chinatown – a Manchurian restaurant called ‘Manchurian Legends’ – mimics the Manchu script. The letter <L>, for example, resembles multiple graphs including a rotated <[illegible]>. It is unlikely that many members of the potential audience would recognise the Manchu script in the sign, so once again it is possible that this is an expression of Manchu identity, or perhaps just a way to make the letters look distinct from others in the area.

Entering the field, with little background evidence to suggest otherwise, it was assumed that writing system mimicry would be a simple phenomenon to identify: either a sign exhibits it, or it does not. Most popular terms for it (e.g. *faux-script*) refer to the product of mimicry rather than the process itself, suggesting that there is typically wholesale incorporation of writing system mimicry.

However, my research suggests otherwise. Although font designers may develop so-called pseudoscripts (e.g. Dafont 2015a; Page Audio Graphics 2015), the majority of the examples identified in this survey incorporate a limited amount of features. In fact it is arguable that defining a pseudoscript is impossible, as the logical extreme of mimicking as many features and graphs as possible is to essentially recreate the writing system. Writing system mimicry is therefore necessarily a compromise, and any attempt to define a pseudoscript (against something that is not a pseudoscript) is at best subjective and at worst unproductive.

Two analyses of the data illustrate these points: an assessment of which features and graphs of each script are commonly mimicked, and a discussion of some ambiguous examples.

The first is an admittedly post-hoc identification of features. One very prominent issue with current methodology and state of research is that there is of yet no explicit identification or listing of these. Further, as Coulmas (2014: 19) mentions, an assessment of which features and graphs are mimicked by different speech communities may indicate perceptual stereotypes about the writing system. This does not fall within the scope of my study, nor am I equipped with the typographic knowledge to attempt it. A casual observation reveals the following. Mimicking Arabic tends to incorporate: diacritic dots; a bottom line typical in handwritten joined Arabic; changes to letter thickness representing calligraphic pen strokes; overt, slightly exaggerated curves; and occasional graphs, including <ک>and<ـک> for Latin <s>. Mimicking Chinese tends to incorporate fewer unique features, mostly limited to ‘rough’, approximate calligraphy, representing handwritten characters, and predominantly straight lines. Only one usable example was found that mimicked Bengali script, incorporating most noticeably the

[5]As of May 2015, this sign has now been replaced with one using plain Latin letters.

horizontal top bar, which is indicative of several Indic scripts, and the connection of <N> to the bar with a loop that resembles a vowel in Bengali.

As it is not yet clear which features are typically mimicked, or even whether or not all the examples found were even intended by the actors, identifying intended writing system mimicry in the linguistic landscape proved very difficult. A number of ambiguous examples were found and later excluded from the data. It is likely that I photographed them because I was overanalysing the signs around me, trying too hard to identify that, say, curved writing in Figure 4 (Bangladeshi East London) was a mimicked feature of Arabic. Less frequently, as in Figure 5, there were signs that may actually have been non-English languages but that I took to be attempts at mimicry.

Figure 4: Is there any Arabic here?

Figure 5: Is there any English here?

A number of methodological concerns arose from this research. One clear conclusion is that a focus on the decision-making processes of agents, which could be gleaned through interviews, is essential to truly understanding motivations for incorporating writing system mimicry. Another issue with the current methodology comes from the nuances of its employment, in particular how to identify and describe the mimicry of individual features. There is also the question of who exactly the sign-makers are. The methodology used here forced me to approximate the agency of some signs, naturally (most likely) resulting in errors.

Writing system mimicry may be roughly contextualised within the linguistic landscape literature as follows. As it is not apparent on any government signs, rather only on private businesses, and appears to have identity and solidarity functions, it seems to form part of the bottom-up and non-official parts of the dichotomies of Section 2.1. It

does not exclusively serve the purposes of identity and solidarity, though: due to being read as the dominant language, it also serves an instrumentality function, as such being a very productive compromise between those goals that are often only achievable through bilingual signage.

7. Conclusions and further questions

This research began with four initial questions:

1. How have other academic fields and non-academic discourses described and accounted for writing system mimicry?
2. How might it fit into existing theories and frameworks of linguistic landscape studies?
3. What is the extent of writing system mimicry in the linguistic landscape?
4. What methodological issues arise, and areas for further research become apparent, following initial research?

All of these are too broad to answer fully within the scope of one article. The intention was to present preliminary research that should be expanded upon and clarified by other scholars. Assessments of academic literature and non-academic discourses revealed a lack of collaboration between, or even recognition of, previous studies; a lack of uniform terminology; and perceptions that writing system mimicry relates to identity, relies on stereotypes, and is often a marketing tool. An analysis of the linguistic landscape literature suggested some dichotomies it may fit into; that it likely considers both instrumentality and symbolism; and that the field's recent methodological focuses on signs' constructions, contexts and agents may be productively applied here.

Writing system mimicry is applied by immigrants to London to a limited but still significant amount of business signs, with variation apparent across type of business and ethnolinguistic group. It is promising, given a general lack of research elsewhere, that so many additional nuances about the implementation of writing system mimicry were revealed. Writing system mimicry has been shown to be a distinctive feature of the linguistic landscape that is a rich source of sociolinguistic research. Far from answering any of the research questions fully, this paper has identified a large range of follow-up questions, including:

- In any given situation, what weighting do marketing and identity have on the decision to incorporate writing system mimicry?
- Why is writing system mimicry more commonly used by owners of eateries than non-eateries? Research into those businesses' clienteles may prove informative here.
- Are the trends identified here consistent with those of other cities?
- What are the motivations to mimic writing systems used by other ethnolinguistic groups, or those that are unlikely to be recognised by the majority of the audience (e.g. the Arabic/Bengali and Manchu examples)?
- What effect, if any, does negative stereotyping have on the use of writing system mimicry?
- Which features are mimicked by which groups, and why? I echo Coulmas (2014) here.

Appendix: All examples of writing system mimicry identified in the survey

Table 2: East London

Example	Business category	Mimicked writing system	Limitations
	Other service	Arabic	
	Other service	Arabic	
	Other service	Arabic	
	Other service	Arabic	
	Eatery	Arabic	Only the bottom of graph <L>
	Eatery	Arabic	
	Eatery	Arabic	
	Eatery	Bengali	
	Eatery	Arabic	

Table 3: Central London

Example	Business category	Mimicked writing system	Limitations
	Other service	Chinese	
	Eatery	Chinese?	
	Eatery	Manchu	Only the graphs <M> and <L>
	Eatery	Chinese	
	Eatery	Chinese	

Table 4: West London

Example	Business category	Mimicked writing system	Limitations
	Other service	Arabic	
	Eatery	Arabic	
	Eatery	Arabic	
	Eatery	Arabic	Mostly only the graphs <I> and <R>
	Eatery	Arabic	
	Eatery	Arabic	
	Eatery	Arabic	

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