

## Research Article

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# Linguistic Landscape and Authenticity in a Japanese Supermarket in Singapore

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**Abstract:** This study examines the linguistic landscape of a Japanese supermarket in Singapore. Building on linguistic landscape research, this study focuses on cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and cross-culinary exchanges that occur in food spaces. The analysis examines promotional signs and their image, text, typography, format, and the overall retail experience, allowing for a reading of “the semiotic landscape,” or how all the elements work together (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006). What emerges is a dominant discourse of authenticity, identifiable by five types: original, natural, influential, referential, exceptional (Gilmore & Pine 2007), and we propose a sixth type of authenticity: health, which is particularly relevant to food. Health authenticity draws on science to inform consumers of nutrition but is made relatable to shoppers through folklore and local Singapore recipes. The use of Japanese is informative for Japanese shoppers while symbolic for non-Japanese shoppers of a Japan that is pure, authentic, high-quality, and significantly, healthy.

**Keywords:** linguistic landscape, Japanese food, language and food, social semiotics, authenticity, Japan in Singapore, Japanese supermarket

## 1 Introduction: Supermarket Signs and Linguistic Landscape

Supermarket signs contribute to the “linguistic landscape” (e.g., Landry & Bourhis 1997, Shohamy & Gorter 2009, Shohamy et al. 2010), or all the visual forms of language present in a public space. Supermarket signs are made in the private sector, part of non-official signs made “bottom-up” (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). They reflect interests of the brand, resulting in a more complex intermingling of languages. As Backhaus (2006: 63) argues, “most non-official signs do not express hierarchies of distinct languages but allow for intermingling of different codes for different purposes.” How, what, and in what way language(s) is used brings up issues of authorship (Malinowski 2009). It is not always clear or simple to identify how signs should be interpreted, and the intended meanings may even be hidden to the writers of signs (Malinowski 2009: 124). To uncover the different authors or production methods in linguistic landscape, Lou (2016) points to Goffman’s (1981) modes of participation, adding to his framework the roles of “designer,” “producer,” and “distributor,” from Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2001) multimodal discourse production stages. The designer provides the concept, the producer articulates it into a material form, and the distributor “re-codes” the products for distribution (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 21). Here we question what images of Japan are portrayed in a Singapore supermarket to better understand cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences as mediated through food products and claims of authenticity.

This study identifies that Singapore Meidi-ya supermarket takes on multiple roles of authorships: “designer” and “producer” of locally made signs, and “distributor” of signs made in Japan and recoded for

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the local store, in order to encourage people to consume in specific ways. Aspects of the signs, including language choice, language position, images, layout, and colors, will be discussed in more detail below, but in a provisional sense; signs rotate according to the sales and seasons. Nonetheless, general patterns are observable and offer insight into language use and meaning. In particular, we identify several functions of two main scripts: Japanese and English, and a few instances of French. In the case of Japanese, a common configuration of roles is a) to inform Japanese-reading consumers about the products, b) to create a sense of affinity with Japanese expatriates through the use of familiar script, and c) to convey authenticity to all consumers, whether Japanese literate or not. English is the global *lingua franca* and is an official language of Singapore. The use of French is specific to French-origin products or dishes, and its use signifies sophistication and cultural authority. In this way, the signs seem to abide by social conventions for code choice while simultaneously positively influence the clientele. This refinement of authorship helps to realize a comprehensive and contextualized analysis of linguistic landscape in a supermarket.

Foreign supermarkets offer cosmopolitan sites where people converge to buy and sell food, representing a microcosm of intercultural exchange and everyday belonging (Duruz et al. 2011). With its thousands of products, supermarkets offer many choices for consumers, products that are both exotic and familiar. Representing a particular culture and food, foreign supermarkets are “cultural ambassadors,” what Wood and Munoz (2007) use to describe ethnic restaurants. Similarly, products are carefully selected and marketed at supermarkets, positioning supermarkets as “cultural intermediaries” (Bourdieu 1984). The authenticity may be presented through language, either informational or symbolic (Silverstein 2003). The foreign supermarket functions as linguistic and culinary intermediaries, in that the visual presence of a non-native language, Japanese in this case, on its products and signs immerses customers in the linguistic landscape. In recontextualizing or “reframing” (Coupland & Garret 2010) of the “minority” language, the signs and displays of the supermarket, not only in language choice but also multimodal and stylistic resources play a role in the framing of Japanese language and culture.

Therefore, the present paper addresses three main questions: (i) what are the functions of Japanese on food marketing signs, (ii) what values are attributed to the food products, and (iii) to what extent is the linguistic landscape of foreign supermarkets a space for the discursive construction of authenticity. After a few introductory paragraphs about the Japanese presence in Singapore, the next section will consider the linguistic landscape of food advertising appeal to authenticity; this is then followed by a close analysis of signs of a specific supermarket. Here, special focus will be put on Japanese and English use in signs of food products.

## 2 Japan in Singapore

The Japanese presence in Southeast Asia, and more specifically, the city state of Singapore, has been profound, equally in terms of business and of popular culture (Ben-Ari & Clammer 2000). Fashion, TV, film, sport, popular music, and most importantly, food, a passion and central component of Singaporean identity (Henderson 2014, Tarulevicz 2013), have been impacted by the cultural influences of Japan. Japanese food is popular and highly present in Singapore, evident in its number of Japanese restaurants, annual Japan food fairs, and a growing number of Japanese grocery stores.

Various approaches have been applied to study the influence of Japan in Singapore, principally a historical approach about the Japanese occupation of Singapore during WWII, 1942-1945 (Matsuoka 2017). While still a sensitive topic for Singapore, the two countries celebrated 50 years of relations in 2016 and continue to foster a positive relationship politically and economically. The two countries have encouraged business partnerships on each other's land, leading to cultural “occurrences” and “flows” (Ben-Ari & Clammer 2000). In addition to business, food is an important conduit of cultural ideas and values, but surprisingly, the presence of Japanese food and language in Singapore has been underexamined.

This study examines the influence of Japan in Singapore at an everyday site of food retail, supermarkets, that are emerging as “new food authorities” (Dixon 2007). Besides guiding consumers on nutrition, taste, and convenience, supermarkets provide a site of cross-cultural exchange, most evidently in foreign

supermarkets. Japanese supermarkets have been successful in East Asia, such as Hong Kong whose first Japanese supermarket (Daimaru) opened in 1960 (Kawahara & Speece 1994). Aiming to be a top-end store for Western and Japanese expatriates and upper-class local consumers, the Hong Kong Japanese supermarkets successfully created a food niche through a quality-oriented strategy, especially of its fresh foods (Kawahara & Speece 1994). Like Hong Kong, Singapore is a cosmopolitan island and welcomes foreign retailers, and food retailing is an important component of this global business.

Opening in 2013, Singapore Meidi-ya is currently the only Meidi-ya branch outside of Japan. As the exterior sign of the building indicates, Singapore Meidi-ya is part of “Liang Court: Asia Fusion By the River,” a tourist area along historical riverside Clarke Quay. Explicitly marking the shopping area as “Asia Fusion” suggests that it is not Singaporean, thus appealing to locals who want something different, expatriate Asians (e.g., Japanese) who want homeland products, or tourists who may be curious and want “Retail, Food & Beverage, Entertainment,” or at least a replicated version based on the interpretations of the Asia Malls’ management. Other Japanese retail stores, such as the bookstore Kinokuniya and clothing store Uniqlo, are also inside the mall. As Gilmore and Pine (2007: 77) observe, themed venues are inspired by places that visitors may never encounter yet perceive even more real.

In Singapore, some people may never go to Japan, much less Japan Meidi-ya, so Singapore Meidi-ya represents the ‘real thing,’ as in what Japanese means in an “Asia Fusion” context. To Singaporeans, this overseas supermarket branch may feel even more real and take on meaning beyond a place to procure groceries; an intended understanding by Meidi-ya according to its website: “Our motion ‘More Than Just Freshness’ refers not only to the freshness and delicious taste of our food but also to our excellent service for a most satisfactory shopping experience” (Meidi-ya Singapore 2018). Continuing, “Meidi-ya is committed to enriching your lifestyle with our fresh and high-quality products” (Meidi-ya Singapore 2018). Signs on the building’s façade contextualize and advertise goods being sold to passer-byers while promotional text on the website extends advertising to remote consumers. This discourse creates a narrative of the grocery store as more than just a place to buy food and promises fulfilment beyond the immediate experience.

While there are several Japanese supermarkets in the city-state, Singapore Meidi-ya is considered to be the pioneer, is the largest, and viewed as one of the best on the island (Teng 2017), selling imported Japanese and non-Japanese groceries, premium fresh produce flown in from Japan, and select products unavailable in most supermarkets. The main branch Meidi-ya in Japan, founded in 1885, holds prestige as the principal purveyor of the Japanese imperial family. Further, Singapore Meidi-ya is distinct in that it is not part of a department store, in comparison to Takashimaya and Isetan, both well-known Japanese department stores with renowned food halls and with branches in Singapore.

### 3 Linguistic Landscape, Authenticity, and Food Products

Linguistic landscape performs two functions: informational and symbolic. At the informational level, it illustrates the linguistic situation of a given area; at the symbolic level, it manages the status of languages used and indexes the relative power and social status attributed to each ethnolinguistic group (Landry & Bourhis 1997; Spolsky & Cooper 1991; Silverstein 2003). The placement of language, and its inclusion or exclusion on signs, particularly government or official signs that created “top-down” (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006), has been a focus of the majority of linguistic landscape research (e.g., Gorter 2006), such as Peter Tan’s (2014) linguistic landscape study of Singapore and the government’s management of its four official languages: English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Different than the official signs, the private signs of Meidi-ya are not of the four official languages in Singapore but of English, the language of business, and Japanese, the symbolic marker communicating the relative status of linguistic communities in the supermarket. As such, this present study does not examine language policy but instead considers the function of the informational and symbolic meanings of these two languages in food advertising.

Contemporary marketers of food products appeal to authenticity in order to build consumer trust and to distinguish brands from others. Graphic design and branding in food packaging act in “telling stories” of authenticity (Barnes 2017), evoking local history and lore to display integrity of place (Gatrell et al. 2018).

This connection between food and place is known as *terroir*, a term originating in France by the Appellations d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC), whose seal is only given to products that are grown or manufactured in a specific region and protects them in the marketplace. Following France's example, other countries such as Italy and Spain have established their own system of classification for quality assurance on food products (Trubek 2008: 251-252). Place boundaries take on new meanings in globalized contexts for food and also for humans. Place is connected with dialect, which is increasingly celebrated as a marker of one's inner identity, resulting in "human *terroir*" (Silverstein 2014). Dialect is also conveyed through written text, the focus of this present study, and could signal one's *terroir*.

In countries without an official governing body to grant them the prestigious seal, marketers use other discursive strategies to construct authenticity, such as the construction of sincerity. In Beverland's (2005) case study of luxury wines, sincerity was achieved through the vintner's promotion of its hand-crafted techniques, uniqueness, relationship to place, and passion for the product as well as a rejection of commercial motives. The brand's ability to position itself as distinct from mass-produced and commercialized products is vital in its success to command a high price. Further, brands use *terroir* as a positioning statement and demonstration of their commitment to "authenticity as purity" (Beverland 2005, Beverland et al. 2009). Like wines, supermarkets are in a competitive field and must create a niche for itself, whether it be value, quality, experience, customer service, or in this study, authenticity.

Authenticity can also be conveyed in the use of foreign words. In a study of Western restaurant menus, Jurafsky et al. (2016: 19) identified that modern expensive restaurants tend to use foreign words from three foreign languages: French, an already established language in gastronomy, is recently joined by Italian and Japanese as "high-status culinary languages." The visual presence of the Japanese language, regardless of what it means, gives an aura of foreignness and authenticity (Jurafsky et al. 2016). Menus are made with deliberation, and similarly, supermarket signs may feature a foreign language intentionally, i.e., to convey authenticity. All signs are mediated and add to the linguistic complexity, as they are part of visual communication that is always coded (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006).

The presence (or absence) of one language or both together affects the interpretation of the text. But it also depends on the viewer. Japanese residents of Singapore may find comfort and familiarity in reading their native language, while non-speakers of Japanese may not know what the messages mean but may "read" these Japanese scripts as 'exotic', 'mysterious', or 'authentic' but cannot understand them as communication, as forms of "writing" unless they are or become members of the culture (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006). The reading of signs is co-produced between the consumer and designer, thus framing authenticity as socially constructed (Maffei 2016). Signs do not have fixed meanings but are fluid, dependent on the reader to activate a specific meaning. According to Blommaert (2010), globalization is characterized by shifts in core-periphery arrangements. When people and texts 'travel,' values-systems and norms shift in various directions, and new normative 'centers' potentially develop. In an analysis of signs in Tokyo of three writing systems: Japanese, English, and French, Blommaert (2010) argues that the signs operate at several different scale-levels: for example, the French on a Japanese phone card is both local (a Tokyo sign) and translocal (a French sign). Locals of Tokyo read the French as an emblem of 'Frenchness,' with its connotations of *chic*. For people with practical competence in French, the French functions are relocated in a Tokyo semiotic economy: "It became, in short, an *exotic* French form" (*italics original*, Blommaert 2010: 42).

References to places, not just foreign, but also local are ways to index authentic history. Singapore's hawker centers, a large collection of outdoor individually-run food and beverage stalls, are a result of a government initiative in the 1970s to gather and centralize itinerant street hawkers. Some contemporary hawker stalls include their original location in their signboard name, referencing local history (Leimgruber 2018). For a young country like Singapore, who became independent in 1965, local history is short, yet cherished and celebrated (Tarulevich 2013). Further, Leimgruber proposes, "they [hawkers] contribute to the construction not only of their own individual brands and identities, but also of a larger identity-marking context at the societal level, spurred on, as it were, by the nation-wide elevation of food to an icon of Singapore" (2018: 195). Linguistic landscape of local food stalls contributes to nation-building. In

contrast, foreign supermarkets add visual reminders of globalization and external pressures on a young nation grappling to articulate a national identity.

The construction of authenticity is neither arbitrary nor necessarily created in mutual and equal collaboration. Authors, or marketers in this case, must be sensitive to their audience, local and foreign customers alike, and their expectations. In an analysis of Chinese restaurants in America, Lu and Fine (1995: 535) claim that, “these locations depend upon a display of the ethnic cultures that is simultaneously seen as ‘authentic’ and within the bounds of cultural expectations.” The consumer’s desire for familiarity and yet longing for the unknown results in a production of illusions: “illusion of continuity” and “illusion of authenticity” (Lu & Fine 1995: 541). Similarly, in a foreign supermarket, the local consumer’s threshold for a “unique, yet comfortable” experience must be met (Lu & Fine 1995: 535), yet enough like the homeland to appeal to the expatriate.

Besides selling physical goods, the supermarket is a vehicle for attaining desired end-states. In a study of British consumers’ choice of supermarket chain, shoppers recorded “happiness,” “quality of life,” “financial security,” and “high self-esteem” as the most important “end-values” associated with food shopping (Devlin et al. 2003: 668). Dixon (2007) also notes the emotional bond created between supermarkets and consumers. Using Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of capital, Dixon (2007: 47) argues that “supermarkets mobilize their vast volume of economic capital [property, financial resources, material possessions] not only to eliminate any competition, but to invest in cultural capital-building in the form of influence over consumer knowledge, preferences and behavioral dispositions.” Strategies of trust-building and forging consumer loyalty increase supermarkets’ role as “new food authorities.” Here, the foreign supermarket becomes what we term ‘foreign food authorities’ who use authenticity as trust-building and selling strategies in advertisements and sales promotions.

Building on this research of linguistic landscape and authenticity, this study examines the language of Japanese food products in a Singapore branch of the Japanese supermarket Meidi-ya. Informed by social semiotics, the analysis examines image, text, typography, media, format, and retail experience, allowing for a reading of “the semiotic landscape,” or how all the elements work together (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006). Thus, the study enables a discussion of issues relating to the language used to communicate authenticity on food signs and products, and the marketing of foreign food and culture (Japanese) in a local context (Singapore). Specifically, the analysis examines how Singapore Meidi-ya displays promotional material and uses semiotic resources to brand Japanese products sold in Singapore as authentic. The signs present cases of replicated authenticity with Japan-made signs alongside locally made ones. The idiosyncrasies in the Japanese-English translations and the new setting result in a Singaporean interpretation of Japanese language, food, and culture.

## 4 Data & Methodology

Data consists of over 400 photos taken during July-October 2018 of Singapore Meidi-ya.<sup>1</sup> During the initial observation, we made two shooting trips in Meidi-ya supermarket, producing a total of 254 pictures, 214 of which were interior store signs. In the following months of fieldwork, we continued to photograph new or changed store signs using a digital camera adding 159 photos to the corpus. In October 2018, four months into the fieldwork, we re-photographed 70 signs in Meidi-ya more systematically. Based on these 70 photos from this single trip, we conducted an exhaustive qualitative analysis of 27 signs and selected 10 to represent in this paper based on their relevancy to the research questions and their linguistic and spatial prominence in Meidi-ya.

In-store signs provide “orienting information” of areas and products of importance for shoppers who want to shop efficiently and plan the most direct route (Wimberley & McClean 2012: 195). There are various texts displayed throughout the store (e.g. aisle markers, pamphlets, food packaging, Japanese television), but the main focus is promotional signs, including posters, banners, and fliers, as they are informative

<sup>1</sup> We received permission from Singapore Meidi-ya to take photos in the store and use it for research.



marketing material, highlighting specific attributes of the selected products, such as their novelty, provenance, flavor, quality, and price.

Supporting the language on the signs are the additional sign elements, such as images and graphics, the overall layout, and font styling, including size, typography, and color. This “ensemble of modes” creates meaning (Kress 2012) and is produced as “meaningful wholes for visual interpretation” (Scollon & Scollon 2003: 8). Where signs are placed and how they interact with and on the space creates a “linguistic landscape” (Landry & Bourhis 1997: 25) in the supermarket. In other words, linguistic landscape consists of the general linguistic situation, including all the visual forms of language, present in the public space of a given area.

Signs in the analysis were selected based on their representative nature of re-occurring themes of authenticity. These themes correspond to five types of authenticity identified by Gilmore and Pine (2007): “referential authenticity” or products that draw on other contexts and sources of inspiration, place for example; “natural authenticity” or products that are not artificial or synthetic, such as organic foods; “original authenticity” or the first of its kind, or being unique; “exceptional authenticity” or products done exceptionally, also meaning done with sincerity; and “influential authenticity” or products that call for a higher goal. While Gilmore and Pine (2007) use an economics and marketing perspective, this study applies a sociolinguistic approach with a focus on what and how language is used to describe Japanese food. Further, this study advances linguistic landscape research with a discussion of authenticity and how it is represented in a foreign context. Moreover, we identify a sixth type of authenticity, one particularly relevant to food—health, and argue that it draws on science to inform consumers of the nutritional information and makes it relatable and applicable through folklore and cooking ideas. The multiple tactics are an effective way to persuade consumers of the value of the food product and to purchase the item.

## 5 Analysis: Interpreting the Language of Japanese Food in Singapore Meidi-ya Supermarket

This section analyzes six types of authenticity: referential, original, natural, influential, and exceptional (Gilmore & Pine 2007) and our proposed authenticity of health, from a selection of key examples. These examples are not exclusive of illustrating other categories of authenticity; that is, one sign may consist of multiple types of authenticity, all of which create a cohesive (or conflicting) message. The interpretation may also differ depending on the shopper, i.e., Japanese expatriate vs Singaporean vs tourist, based on their “evaluative framework” and “normative center” (Blommaert 2010). Nonetheless, the categories provide a systematic way to analyze different ways to promote a foreign commodity.

### 5.1 Referential Authenticity

Authenticity may be perceived referentially when inspiration is from rituals of long-standing cultures and traditions (Gilmore & Pine 2007). In such historical references, authenticity may not be derived not so much for being the original but more for being a faithful representation. Here interpreters, such as Meidi-ya, must renounce its authorship and originality of another culture’s culinary specialty. Figure 1 is a sign promoting panettone, a traditional Italian Christmas cake.



Figure 1: Panettone- Italian traditional cake for Christmas

Nestled within panettone packages, the sign in Figure 1 advertises the Italian fruit cake, using both Japanese and English twice. The most prominent place is the top line, Meidi-ya's endorsement, first in Japanese in the largest script followed by English: "Meidi-ya recommend [sic] Italian traditional cake for Christmas [Panettone]." The second iteration in Japanese and English adds that the cake is "especially Milano," educating customers about the product's origin and its current offerings. Of referential authenticity, heritage is central to being true and real, the opposite of a fake product (Gilmore & Pine 2007). This centrality leads the signs of Meidi-ya to honor the heritage of panettone and feature one of its most iconic brands, Tre Marie.

Two photos below the text show what is inside the boxes, visually informing shoppers that panettone is a fruit-studded bread cake. While the left image displays the 'making' of panettone with the box, whole cake, and sliced and plated, as a visual instruction of serving, the right image is the 'presence' of heritage creating credibility and proximity by the close-up of the dried cherries and oranges and crumb, enticing consumers' demands for buying something new or stimulating their desire to consume. Besides enhancing its authenticity, the sign adds transparency of the product and its origins.

An additional endorsement to the store name, the sign also features the panettone logo in a prominent position on the top left of the sign. The brand is in all-caps 'TRE MARIE,' Italian for "three Marie," which refers literally to the three female figures in the logo who are wearing plain tunics and head covers, apparel typical of ancient Israel, and symbolically to women mentioned in the Bible. Likely, one Marie is the Catholic Virgin Mary, an icon of purity and reverence, characteristics that are referentially extended to the artisan of cake-making and the panettone ingredients.

Further, the sign suggests that the panettone be served for special occasions: “It upgrade [sic] your Christmas party.” As an authentic product in origin and history, panettone offers a legacy history deserving of celebrating and honoring. The sign prompts consumers to think about the future in every respect—the near-future party and long-term future by continuing a past practice of serving cake at religious holidays. In addition to sustaining heritage, serving the cake is a way to ‘upgrade’ one’s party, or to display culinary authority, in Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of class and status. Visually staging the experience of serving the cake, the offering is more distinct and dramatic.

Thus, through referential authenticity, Meidi-ya supermarket links itself to other places steeped in culinary tradition and history, such as Italy and particularly Milan.

## 5.2 Original Authenticity

Original authenticity is an offering of a product or service that is different from anything else, stimulating consumer’s curiosity (Gilmore & Pine 2007: 57). Relationship to place is a way to attribute originality to the product, marking it as the “real thing” (Beverland 2005). Authenticity of place is inherent in products that depend on the land, such as agriculture and livestock. The product cannot be replicated anywhere else by anyone else, giving it an elusive quality. The limited quantity further adds a scarcity value, increasing its market and symbolic value (Beverland 2005).

In Singapore Meidi-ya, banners are used to cluster products from the same region: edamame, jute, leafy greens, pumpkin, and tomatoes, from the Gifu prefecture, in the next example (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Original authenticity: produce from Gifu

The linguistic landscape is predominantly Japanese with the only English consisting of ‘Hida tomato’ and ‘JA’ for Japan Agricultural Cooperative, suggesting that the signs are made in Japan and used in the same way to mark place in both Meidi-ya Japan and in Meidi-ya Singapore. In Japan, basic English phrases may be understood, but in Singapore, Japanese is likely not to be understood. However, in both locations, the



shoppers' literacy in a particular language does not matter so much as their multiliteracy in understanding the visual and spatial grouping of the vegetables (The New London Group 1996). Negotiating multiple languages (Japanese and English) and discourses (marketing and authenticity), shoppers rely on the pragmatic clustering of the signs and the produce to understand that the produce originates from the same region, and thus is remarkable.

On the left, the green banner marks edamame (soybean) as from the Gifu prefecture: *Gifu-ken-san* (Gifu prefecture product), while the banner on the right promotes tomatoes from Hida, a city located in Gifu ('Hida tomato'). The products in between are also from Gifu as noted on the five signs: jute (*moroheiya*), edamame, pumpkin (*Sukuna-Kobocha*; Sukuna is a city in Gifu), mustard spinach greens (*komatsuna*), and tomatoes ('Hida tomatoes').

The right tomato sign promotes the Hida tomatoes for having three desirable characteristics: taste, quality, and freshness, which reads as in (1).

- (1)           Aji       hinshitsu       sendo       no       toripuru-suri  
               tasty    quality       freshness    GEN   triple-three  
               '(Hida Tomatoes have) The triple three of tastiness, (high) quality, and freshness'

The reiterations of three—triple (*toripuru*), three (*suri*), and the three characteristics (tasty or *aji*, quality or *hinshitsu*, freshness or *sendo*)—add emphasis to the sign's message. Nominating the Hida Tomatoes as *toripuru suri* is a playful reference and metaphor of their rare excellence in three categories of good produce.

The creation of a mascot specific to the region or to a produce is also a way to reference a place.<sup>2</sup>Here, an edamame-shaped green figure—Mame-tan—is used on the banner and repeated on the middle sign. The smiling mascot is cute (*kawaii*), presenting soybean as fun and playful, ready to be unzipped and eaten. Beside Mame-tan are two speaking bubbles and round typeface that add to its personification and friendliness, and are as appealing as the product marketed by the store. Mame-tan appears to be produce-specific made by JA Whole Farm Gifu, born in 2014 with its own history and personality (a 9-year old who likes water from the Nagara river and whose hobbies are working in farms and sunbathing, etc.) (Chubu News 2014). In addition to promoting edamame, Mame-tan also represents Gifu, where edamame is cultivated.

Mascots (*yuru-kyara*, which means "loose" or "relaxed" characters) are popular with celebrity status in Japan and internationally, and are effective for promoting local regions by giving a 'face' to the municipality (McKirdy 2014; Ripley & Henry 2014). Japanese Kumamoto prefecture also relies on its blackbear mascot, Kumamon, for promotion, such as the label of an orange juice product sold in the supermarket Singapore Meidi-Ya (Figure 7). Both mascots Mame-tan and Kumamon offer original authenticity, rendering themselves and the areas they represent as unique, stimulating curiosity, especially for non-Japanese. In this sense, they also offer exceptional authenticity by marking the regions Gifu and Kumamoto as "different," which Gilmore and Pine (2007: 67) note is part of its appeal: "Anything different from what we're used to—particularly places, the more exotic the better—creates a sense of 'other' that comes off as authentic...." Here, mascots mark place as different, but not "exotic" in the sense of strange or unfamiliar. Instead, place is made more relatable through the mascots' friendly smiling faces, resulting in an informality that presents the produce as an everyday food, appropriate in a grocery store that wants repeat and daily customers. With an offering denoting personal, Meidi-ya sets the normal apart for individual Japanese customers familiar with Gifu and Kumamoto, greeting them genuinely and serving them sincerely through the personified mascots.

<sup>2</sup> The use of mascots for agricultural products is popular and lucrative in Japan. In 2011, Kumamon was voted top in a nationwide survey of mascots. After the contest, Kumamon became nationally popular and in just two years, generated US \$1.2 billion in economic benefits, including tourism and product sales, for his region, as well as publicity (Brasor 2014).

### 5.3 Natural Authenticity: Hokkaido dairy

The next signs (Figure 3, 4, 5, and 6) are examples of “natural authenticity” with the projection of an “untamed place” rich in organic ingredients (Gilmore & Pine 2007: 52). Featuring Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan, the sign in Figure 3 invites shoppers to “look around—flowery Hokkaido” and admire the open fields of yellow flowers and distant mountain range, emanating pure uncultivated nature. Made by the Hokkaido Tourist Association, the attractive poster serves for Hokkaido tourism, but when juxtaposed with another sign featuring the island’s food products, it also provides a ‘picture’ of where the food products come from, creating authenticity of place. The image also may pique interest of Singaporeans to visit Hokkaido and evoke pride and nostalgia for Japanese in seeing how beautiful their country is. Figure 6 is an up-close shot of the advertisement sign for Hokkaido desserts and makes up part of the linguistic landscape in Figure 3.



**Figure 3:** “Look around - flowery Hokkaido” whose fertile fields yield rich dairy products

The poster rotates throughout the year with landscapes representing each season, such as the fall harvest (Figure 4) and ice fields for winter (Figure 5), and places the products in situ. The message remains consistent nonetheless, i.e., Hokkaido is a beautiful place that produces beautiful food. At the same time, the products do not change depending on the season and are available all year due to their freezer packaging. While representing a false sense of seasonality, the posters may tap into fantasies of Singaporeans who long for more than one season as Singapore lies on the equator and is tropical year-round.



**Figure 4:** Fall sunrise- Hokkaido Tourism Association  
 “MAKE IT SLOW, 5:00 a.m. - the breeze and ground awaking from their slumber.”



**Figure 5:** Hokkaido Winter scene- Hokkaido Tourism, “Natural Beauty. Adventure. Excitement—all begins from here.”





Figure 6: Hokkaido Sweets

The marketing of Hokkaido continues in the smaller sign propped up by the poster from Figure 3. In Figure 6, at the top of the sign, a thick red border includes text: “Hokkaido Dosanko Plaza” (a large regional specialty shop in Japan), which is also superimposed over a simple map outline of the Hokkaido island, providing another visual index of place. Below the red rectangle is Japanese script in three different font styles, all rounded and informal, repeated in (2).

- (2) 北海道のやみつき♥スイーツならこちら  
 Hokkaidō no yamitsuki ♥ suiitsu nara kochira  
 Hokkaidō GEN addiction sweets if this  
 ‘If (you are looking for) addictive ♥sweets from Hokkaido, then, (try) these.’

The largest word *yamitsuki* (“addiction”) is followed by a heart, an iconic symbol for ‘love’ and whose red color visually connects the text with the title above. Together, *yamitsuki* and the heart suggest: ‘you’ll love this product.’ Literally, consumers who are “looking for addictive sweets from Hokkaido” are warned that once they start eating the sweets, they will not be able to stop.

Reinforcing the message of “addiction” is the red heart, whose color and symbol draws attention to the phrase and indicates the love of craft. While craftsmanship is typically associated with small, handcrafted production, here the sweets are mass-produced by J.sweets, one of Japan’s largest confectioners, who won “Gold award in <2013> at the 26<sup>th</sup> National Sweets Exhibition.” This public validation and additional design elements (circle, swirl, logo) distinguish the Hokkaido products from competition.

Corresponding to the promotional signs are the actual products in the freezer case. The product signs present an interesting interaction between English, French, and Japanese: “HONMA Donut”, “MIREI Edam Fromage”, “MIREIKA Lemon Cheese Cake”, “MIREIKA Yogurt Cheese Cake”, and “MIREI Rare Cheese CRU.” The Japanese brand that produces the product is first and in all-caps followed by an English or French word. The English and French words refer to the non-Japanese origin of the products, suggesting the mastery and



sophistication of the Japanese in being able to make them even better with natural Hokkaido dairy. Further, the spelling of “yoghurt” as <yogult> suggests the translation is done by a Japanese native speaker, as the Japanese language does not differentiate phonemically between /r/ and /l/.

The “rare cheese” translation is also Japanese, as cheesecakes in Japan are named by their cooking method; “baked cheesecakes” are baked in the oven and “rare cheesecakes” are made with gelatin and set in a refrigerator. “Rare cheese” flavor refers to the “rare cheesecake” flavor that tastes of cream cheese and lemon. Following “rare cheese” on the store product sign is “CRU”, a French term traditionally translated as “growth” and is used to describe wines of specific *terroir*, typically a vineyard of superior quality. The English translation of “cru” is “raw”, which in this case would translate as unbaked in the case of “rare cheesecakes.” All three languages index a different meaning but contribute to signaling the product’s rare (in a double sense) qualities produced from Hokkaido dairy.

The linguistic landscape of juxtaposed posters, signs, and food products create a cohesive discourse of authenticity, in this case a discourse of natural authenticity of Hokkaido as agriculturally rich, beautiful and pure, producing pristine dairy desserts.

## 5.4 Influential Authenticity: Farmer to Product

Part of the farm-to-table movement is the discourse of one’s food choices having a larger consequence globally in terms of sustainability and the environment. This calling to join a higher goal is “influential authenticity” (Gilmore & Pine 2007: 50). Ways to appeal to the emotions of consumers are to make the product as human as possible with transparency in its origins. In the next example, images of the farmer and the products in the field are an effective way to render influential authenticity.



Figure 7: Farm Olympia and Mikan oranges: from field to bottle.

In Figure 7, influential authenticity is employed in the promotion of a new farm (Farm Olympia), not just to market a new product (Mikan Orange Juice), but to show consumers that by buying the orange juice, traditional agricultural methods are preserved. The farmer is introduced as “new” (*shin ei kiei*) in the sense of genuine and enthusiastic, producing “real” (*honmono*) orange juice with Mikan oranges harvested at the “best timing” (*saiko no taimingu*) under “policy that strictly keeping good quality” (*zettai ni dakyo shi nai seizohin kanri*). Farm Olympia’s name may be evoking Mount Olympus, the highest mountain of Greece and home to 12 gods in Greek mythology. Although expensive (SG \$21.00; US \$15), this premium orange juice that the gods drink is worth it.

Farm Olympia is behind the farmer, setting the scene as the Kyushu mountain region. Johnston and Baumann (2014) argue that “food is deemed authentic when it is seen to emerge fresh from a simple way of life, a simple mode of presentation, and maintains its straight-forwardness all the way to the plate” (76). This simplicity, they note, makes invisible the work involved in producing such complex and labor-intensive foods. Seasonality and adherence to policy further evoke authenticity by localizing products.

The discourse is similar to the marketing of other “homegrown” brands, such as Ya Kun Kaya Toast in Singapore: “First, the devotion to purity and integrity in food production is distinguished from negative associations of industrial processes. Second, the human element puts a face to the food, tracing a definite origin. The food is trustworthy because the maker is identifiable” (Tam 2017: 50). The campaign of Farm Olympia makes evident the purity of the origin and maker. Evoking localized terrains and tradition in consumer consciousness, the campaign equates domestic food production (*kokusan*) with quality. The rustic mountain range frames the farmer and the oranges in a native environment. The farmer shows face, literally and figuratively, assuming responsibility for the product while adding a human element to it. As Assmann (2010: 243) notes, in studying recent food scares in Japan, “a food product whose ‘producer’s face is visible’ (*seishansha no kao ga mieru*) is considered trustworthy.”

The campaign connects a sense of ‘farm’ in the consumer’s mind also with the orange juice bottle label, which features Kumamon, the mascot or *tochikyara* created by the government of the Kumamoto prefecture to draw tourists to the region. Like the farmer, the mascot creates a ‘face’ for the region and renders the orange juice legitimate and authentic as a “special growing” (*tokubetsu-saibai*) Kumamoto product (*Kumamoto-ken-san*). Consumers in Singapore may recognize the image due to its international fame (Steinberg 2016). The strategy of brand recognition, as evident in the Hokkaido dairy promotion, may have the highest impact on consumer choices.

The real/unreal—farmer/mascot—dual representations of the region reflect the changing social life of the cuisine they belong to, as well as the continuity of elements that shape Japanese culinary heritage in present-day Japan. The farmer and orange production perpetuate the Japanese tradition through its cuisine, and the inanimate bear is part of mainstream cultural identity. The commodification and consumption of history through the orange juice product are ways to revive the formerly exclusive and flourishing prefecture cuisine, directly appealing to influential authenticity.

## 5.5 Exceptional Authenticity: Prized Peaches

Goods are perceived as having “exceptional authenticity” when “it is something specific, exceptional—*just for me*” as emphasized by Gilmore and Pine (2007: 65). Products that are of exceptional authenticity differ from standardized, mass-produced products by offering customization and in limited quantities. Packaging and promotional text can help elevate certain products above others, particularly in a supermarket where most goods are common and part of one’s daily existence.

For example, fruit is a daily consumption, but can take on greater value and symbolic meaning when packaged as a gift. Highly perishable and seasonal, fruit is considered a luxury product in Japan. As a gift-giving culture (Befu 1986), Japanese frequently give gifts of fruit, along with other gourmet foods including chocolate, beef, alcohol, and tea. Fruit is meticulously packaged and wrapped with tissue paper and foam padding, such as the products depicted in Figure 8.



Figure 8: Carefully packaged fruit: Kōsui-nashi (Kosui pears) and Hida-momo (Hida peaches)



Figure 9.:“Summer’s jewels”: Peaches from Hida

Peaches (*momo*) are promoted as “summer’s jewels” (*natsu no hōseki*) for their exceptional quality and as a unique variety (#18) from Hida. In Figures 8 and 9, the signs are made by JA in Hida, as indicated by the logo at the bottom left. In Figure 9, the sign on the left describes the peach as an original breed from Hida (*Hida-momo*). The sign on the right describes the peach in terms of its harvesting time in August with its flavors and textures changing from soft (*yawarakaku*) and melt-in-your-mouth (*torokeru*) to slightly sour (*sanmi*) and rich flavor (*aji*) to crunchy. Further, the peaches are described for their large size and long storage capability.

Gifts are presented on special occasions but also to show appreciation and most importantly, to build relationships (Befu 1986). Being able to buy costly gifts is a show of one’s economic means, which is highly valued in a materialistic society like Singapore. Like in Japan, Japanese fruit in Singapore can demand high prices because of its superior quality and transferred symbol as a luxury item. As Van der Veen (2003, 405-406) notes: “In terms of food, luxury usually denotes foods that are desirable or hard to obtain but not essential to human nutrition,” and even more as Berry (1994: 41) notes, “a luxury good is a widely desired (because not yet generally attained) good that is believed to be ‘pleasing’, and the general desirability of which is explained by it being a specific refinement, or qualitative aspect, of some universal generic need.” Luxury foods offer a refinement of a food, basic or not, and provide a means of distinction because they are not yet widely attained. The natural and exceptional authenticity of the Japanese fruit is rendered as being rare in kind and fleeting, such as these Hida peaches that are scarce and only available in August. Further, peaches conceived in Hida, a fertile region has a “luxury attribute due to its ‘birth name’” (Otero 2018: 37), inherit similar connotations of status, appealing to exceptional authenticity. Being able to access and afford such fruit to eat for oneself or as a gift is a sign of distinction and sophistication.

At the same time, Singapore Meidi-ya orients its marketing strategy to the local consumer and economy. Counter-intuitively, while expensive, the peaches are presented as a bargain; the “usual” SG \$32.80 (USD 24) is discounted to SG \$29.80 (USD 22) per packet (“per pkt”). Although the authenticity of exceptionalism is paradoxical, consumers share the same cultural schema and understand the visual representation as coded (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006: 32). The prices are coded as a discount to attract local consumers who like a good deal, but still high enough to signify quality. Singapore Meidi-ya’s promotion of price reduction contrasts with other overseas Japanese supermarkets, particularly in Hong Kong where sales promotions are less about price-cutting and more about building brand loyalty (Kawahara & Speece 1994).

## 5.6 Authenticity in Health: Scientific references and Proverbial wisdom

The concept of authenticity- what company offers to a customer- lies at the core of discourse as a marketing strategy in sales and advertisements. While Gilmore and Pine (2007) recognize five distinct authentic offerings (original, natural, influential, referential, and exceptional), we discern one more, health, which is especially relevant to food. We propose that authenticity in health can be defined in this way: *people tend to perceive as authentic that which has health and/or medicinal properties and transformative capabilities. The healthier the product, the more real it is, and thus, the more wholesome and nourished an individual is after consuming it.*

Here, an everyday Japanese food takes on elevated status with historical and medical discourses (Figure 10).





**Figure 10:** Wakayama Nanko Umeboshi - Salted Plums: historical and nutritious

A common Japanese condiment, salted plums (*umeboshi*) are symbolic of traditional Japanese cuisine; in a survey given to Japanese, umeboshi was listed as one of the top ten dishes to be served at a Japanese-style dinner (Cwiertka 2006: 7-8) and forms the center of the patriotic dish 'Rising Sun Lunch Box' (*Hinomaru bentō*) along with plain rice, resembling the Japanese flag (Cwiertka 2006: 117). Umeboshi is a symbol of perseverance during hardships; hinomaru bentō is associated with the poverty and extreme thriftiness of Japan at the end of WWII, when school children could not bring any main dishes from home besides umeboshi due to the lack of materials. Eating the plums is a bitter(sweet) reminder of the austere times and strong Japanese character.

The display features salted plums from the top-producing region Wakayama. The fruit's consumption traces its origins "since the Edo era," a period (1603-1868) of economic and cultural growth and stability in Japan (Cwiertka 2006). References to past ways of eating transfer authority to contemporary versions in the sense that it has already been tested (and tasted) and proven to be healthy (and delicious) (and long-lasting).

Authenticity of health constructs the plums within a science paradigm in which food is linked to optimal health. These "functional foods" are consumed on a regular basis and purportedly provide physiological benefits beyond their basic nutritional qualities (Henderson & Johnson 2012: 71-73). Here the plum's organic compounds are emphasized in capital letters: "Citric-acid and Malic-acid," followed by its purported health benefits: "Its flesh has Citric-acid and Malic-acid that is mildly sterilizing and also promote [sic] appetite." The medical discourse legitimizes claims about the plum's health attributes.

Continuing the health discourse is the use of proverbs, which translates the nutritional benefits into more common and well-known messages for consumers. The Japanese proverb "a [sic] Ume(boshi) spares day's trouble" is tentatively compared to ("seems to be equivalent of") the English proverb: "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." The conventional wisdom is shared cross-culturally, as suggested with both Japanese and English proverbs, and is passed down from generation to generation, again validating the fruit's consumption for health reasons.

Moreover, the plum advertisement's visual design highlights the significance of the proverbs. The sign has two font colors: black for informational discourse and blue for the two proverbs that are additionally offset with brackets. Lexical parallelisms are made by repeating "day" and semantically by indicating health benefits of daily consumption: eating salted plums "spares day's trouble" similar to "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." The English version plays on phonological parallelisms by repeating the sequence of sounds, the diphthongs [eɪ] in "day" and "away," and creating rhythm, which contributes to generating a cheerful and relatable health discourse. Moreover, the rhyming is a mnemonic aid to improve recallability of something, i.e., consumers are reminded of the plums and more likely to purchase them.

The daily use of the salted plums, which contrasts with the gifting rhetoric of the peaches, is further implied with cooking suggestions following the proverbs. Consumers are given "ideals" on how to use the plums, specifically for typical Singaporean dishes: "whole" in cooking fish, porridge, and rice, and as a "paste" in sauces and drinks. The suggestions make the products more accessible and within the realm of comfort. According to Lu and Fine (1995: 535), "in a society that values toleration and cross-cultural contacts, many consumers desire a unique, yet comfortable experience, given their own cultural preferences." Adding an unfamiliar food to familiar dishes provides a way to connect the historical, foreign food to a contemporary and local context.

The advertisement communicates messages of health discourse to influence positively consumer relationship (i.e., gain trust) and encourage purchase intention, especially with messages that are endorsed by science and common wisdom. The Wakayama Nanko plums represent something more than itself and evokes a universal belief about food as having medicinal properties.

## 6 Discussion

Singapore Meidi-ya's marketing strategies use a discourse of authenticity identifiable by six themes: referential, original, natural, influential, exceptional, and health. A sense of place is present in all six, as the main offering of Meidi-ya and its products is Japanese origin. The Meidi-ya endorsement of European-origin products, such as Italian panettone, also attributes products with authenticity of place. The re-creation of Japanese authenticity in Singapore Meidi-ya is evident from its Asia mall context, Japanese Tourism board signs displayed alongside products from particular regions, such as Hida and Hokkaido, and in mascots like the Mame-tan and Kumamon. Locally-made promotional signs, such as the one crafted about Wakayama plums, connect the foreign culture (Japan) with the local one (Singapore) through cross-culturally similar proverbs and through recipes in how to use the condiment in the local cuisine. In both Japan and Singapore, the promotion of the seasonal, personal, small-batch produce, whether tomatoes, orange juice, peaches, frozen dairy products, or salted plums—versus year-round, impersonal mass production—lends itself to authenticity. The food products are prepared exceptionally well, made evident in the meticulous packaging, and executed individually, as illustrated with images of the farm and farmer.

The language use on the signs, principally Japanese and English, illustrates how authorship and audience shift depending on the context. As a distributor of Japan-made signs, Singapore Meidi-ya, like the producers in the wine markets of Japan and Singapore (Rod et al. 2012), constructs "vertical relationships" in the supply chain. The language, images, materials, and positioning of the signs in relation to the food products are 'read' as 'Japanese' by Japanese and non-Japanese literate shoppers, resulting in an informational effect (Landry & Bourhis 1997). Japanese script could also signal 'exotic' or 'non-local' for non-Japanese for a symbolic effect. English has both an information function, providing information about the product, and a symbolic function, reflecting Singapore's presence in global commerce.

Further, this juxtaposition of different languages is not unusual, as Singapore practices "English-knowing bilingualism," which refers to how Singaporeans know English and another official language, as opposed to any two official languages (Pakir 1992). English typically would appear unmarked, but set in a foreign grocery store, its presence is more marked. In these discursive constructions, the evaluative positioning frequently occurs, as various actors (stores, brands, products) are constructed positively, depending on the nature of legitimization of authority.

As a “designer” and “producer” of locally made signs, Singapore Meidi-ya’s visual promotions bridge Japan and Singapore, translating authenticity for the local setting. The print resources offer general information, while also exuding a personality and normalcy to an otherwise sterile environment. The visual displays and unique translations provide a personal exchange and extra meaning to a potentially unremarkable domestic chore. Even more, the Meidi-ya brand constructs “horizontal” relations with customers (Rod et al. 2012), creating a sense of community (Thellefsen & Sorensen 2013). As a foreign-brand supermarket, Singapore Meidi-ya positions itself in the role of linguistic and cultural intermediaries in the discursive construction of relationships with consumers.

What one eats, and what is sold in supermarkets, can reveal a great deal about a society. In this instance, food purchase is used as a cultural barometer of the prestige and integration of not only cuisines but also languages. The consumption of Japanese culture and products, or “Japanese-ness,” is because they are not only produced in Japan but also represent the idea of “being Japanese” (Chua 2000: 136). Further, according to Landry and Bourhis (1997: 27), the use of a specific language can “contribute most directly to the positive social identity of ethnolinguistic groups.” For example, the representation of Japanese language and cuisine in the supermarket suggests the inclusion of the Japanese culture in the wider Singaporean society.

## 7 Conclusion

Foreign supermarkets create opportunities where new food is introduced in a nonthreatening and interactive environment rich in cultural and linguistic exchange. A discourse of authenticity reassures consumers of the integrity of the food products through the use of language, images, and positioning of signs in relation to the food products. While the store and its products are not necessarily true to their more original forms in Japan, the original form is not necessarily the best form. Instead, authenticity may be more about the present, how the person conceives of authenticity in the moment. Daily shopping experiences provide such moments of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural exchanges every day, offering enriching opportunities to learn about and taste new foods and cultures.

Future research might build on the findings presented here by extending the analysis of discourses of authenticity rendered visible in the linguistic landscape beyond the international supermarket (see e.g., Gordin et al. 2016) to include internal discourses, with particular focus on sensory landscapes (see e.g., Duruz 2016). Likewise, more attention could be devoted to the symbolic construction of the public space. Such work should also combine the approaches of Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), whose research draws from sociology theory, and Blommaert (2013), who emphasizes the importance of the sociocultural context onto any analysis, ethnographic or otherwise, of the linguistic landscape. In this manner, the presence of Japanese in Singapore’s linguistic landscape might be considered in more comprehensive detail, for understanding how it achieved its current place in society.

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