What Is Expected of Clerks Wearing "In Training" Tags? Analyzing the Tag Roles

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Abstract: At cash registers in Japanese supermarkets and convenience stores, one may see clerks wearing "In training" tags on their chest. The tag denotes an apprentice learning the job duties while working on the actual job. This study aimed to clarify the role of nametags from the perspectives of the three types of persons involved with the tags, that is, the persons looking at the clerks wearing them, the clerks wearing them, and the managers requesting the clerks to wear them. The results indicate that the custom of wearing such nametags is related to the rule of affixing beginner's marks to vehicles and is one of the Japanese forms of communication that requires consideration from others.

Keywords: Tag, "in training," linguistic landscape, function, pragmatics

1. Introduction

Linguistic landscapes are linguistic expressions printed on public and commercial signs installed in a particular area or district, and they come naturally into view (cf. Landry & Bourhis, 1997). However, linguistic landscapes cannot be restricted to signs installed in public and commercial spaces. In Japan, textual information can be found in different places, and these as a whole form a linguistic landscape in Japan. For example, walking around towns or in shops, one may note not only seeing the textual information found on fixed objects, but also the textual information in a variety of additional situations. The written information on moving objects, such as decals and stickers on mobile vehicles and the tags that shopkeepers wear on their chest, also constitute part of the linguistic landscape in Japan. To obtain a whole picture of the linguistic landscape found in Japanese society, these types of information must be also included in linguistic landscape research.

Similar to Nishijima (2022), who analyzed the expressions on decals attached to vehicles in cities, this study focused on the nameplates sometimes worn by shopkeepers on their chest in supermarkets and convenience stores, saying "in training" or "part time," and analyzed these expressions from a sociolinguistic perspective. By doing so, the role of wearing such nameplates, as well as considerate behavior, were clarified.

2. Problem Description

2.1 Public Signs as Background

When walking around Japanese cities, one can observe a variety of public and commercial signs on roads and buildings. It can be said that cities are filled with a variety of written information, and such signs are called the *linguistic landscape*. According to Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 23), the linguistic landscape is "the visibility and salience of language on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region."

One of the pioneering studies in Japan of such signs found in the city must be mentioned in the field of geography, a survey of changes in shop name signs over time. Masai (1972) presented a survey conducted in 1962 of shop name signs of all types of commercial establishments in the Shinjuku-Kabukichō area from a geographical perspective. Twenty years later, Masai conducted an additional survey targeting coffee shops. This was reported in Masai (1983). He walked around Shinjuku and conducted a survey by recording in his field notebook what names and characters were used to describe what he considered to be coffee shops. As a result, the names of 550 coffee shops were recorded. By language, the highest adoption rate was in English (211 names, 38%). In addition, it was found that the names of Japanese coffee shops were the most westernized of all shop types.

Japanese linguistic landscape studies in the field of linguistics stem from economic linguistics (Inoue, 2000, 2011). They have generally analyzed the shift in linguistic writing preferences of characters from kanji to katakana and then to alphabetic script. From there, focusing mainly on fixed signs installed in public spaces, the kind of information, language used, and linguistic characters have been analyzed, and the relationship with regional characteristics has been explained (Shoji et al., 2009). Kurabayashi (2020) examined public signs from a stylistic perspective and attempted to clarify the characteristic modes of expressions found. Studies of linguistic landscapes found in public spaces have focused on signs installed in the city.

The study of linguistic landscapes has been limited, as the above definition indicates, to fixed and printed signs in specific locations, as follows:



Figure 1-a Figure 1-b Figure 1-c Figure 1-d Figure 1-e

Figure 1-a illustrates two signs found on a public road in Germany. Under the traffic sign for pedestrians, the sign using a to-infinitive structure reads: "Hunde an der Leine zu führen [to keep dogs on a lead]" with an illustration of a dog on a lead. Figure 1-b depicts a railroad station in Japan. The multiple installed signs say, "Kakekomi jōsha-wa kikendesukara oyamekudasai [Please do not rush into the car, as it is dangerous]." These signs are written in one language, that is, in German and Japanese, respectively. Figures 1-c and 1-d are multilingual signs, namely in Japanese and English and Japanese, English, Chinese, and Korean, respectively. Recently, the addition of pictograms to multilingual signs has become more common, as illustrated in Figure 1-e.

However, they are not the only ones belonging to the linguistic landscape.

2.2 Car Decals

For example, in Japanese society, textual information is found not only on fixed signs, but also on moving objects such as vehicles (Nishijima, 2022a, 2022b).



Figure 2

Figure 2 shows the rear view of a private car. Two decals can be seen, marked with a red frame. These are enlarged in Figures 3-a and 3-b, respectively.



Figure 3-a Figure 3-b

Figures 3-a and 3-b show the following sentences under the images of a camera and a baby, respectively:

- (1)ドライブレコーダー 録画中 doraibu rekōdā rokugachū 'drive recorder recording'
- (2) 赤ちゃんが乗ってます akachan-ga nottemasu 'baby-NOM on board'

Unlike public signs, the expressive intent of few car decals is immediately obvious. This is because many decals simply explain the situation, and it is unclear what is intended communicatively. Nevertheless, such decals with linguistic expressions on a car can also be understood as part of linguistic landscape, as these signs also form the linguistic landscape of Japanese cities.

2.3 Other Linguistic Landscapes: Name Tags

To obtain an overall picture of the linguistic landscape of a society, it is necessary to target not only the linguistic information directly depicted on fixed signs (i.e., public and commercial signs and the linguistic texts written directly on moving vehicles or on car decals), but also other linguistic information that comes into view in a variety of situations. For example, a previous study focused on English textual information written on T-shirts as clothing worn by people (Seargeant, 2011). Other garments that have text written on them include name plates and tags worn on the chest.



Figure 4

Figure 4 illustrates the maternity mark sometimes worn by pregnant women. This sign says, おなかに赤ちゃんがいます onaka-ni aka-chan-ga imasu 'I have a baby in my tummy' with an illustration of a mother and a baby. This indicates to those around her that she is pregnant. However, its actually asks for consideration from those who see it without verbalizing it. For example, if a woman wearing this symbol is standing on a public train, it can be interpreted as an appeal to seated passengers who see it to give up their seats.





Figure 5-a Figure 5-b¹

Figure 5-a is a vaccination proof, which says 新型コロナワクチン接種済 shingata korona wakuchin sesshuzumi 'vaccinated against new coronavirus'. Figure 5-b shows an example of how it is worn as a nameplate. In addition, it only conveys the information that the person wearing it has been vaccinated, but does not explicitly tell people anything. The

¹ https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASP8M6WFFP8MULFA00M.html?iref=pc_photo_gallery_bottom

interpretation would be that the vaccine is generally effective in preventing infection, so it has a reassuring effect on people who are afraid that they may get infected.

2.4 Objectives

At the cash registers of Japanese supermarkets, convenience stores, and other customer service establishments, one may see clerks wearing nametags with the words 研修中 kenshūchū 'in training' or アルバイト arubaito 'part time' on their chests. "In training" means that the employee is "an apprentice until he or she learns the job duties while working on the actual job." The "part-time" sign states that the employee is a part-time worker, not a full-time employee.

This study focuses on tags such as "in training" and "trainee" among the wearable tags mentioned above. The aim of this paper is twofold:

- 1) To consider tags seen frequently in supermarkets and convenience stores, such as 研修中 kenshūchū 'in training' and 実習生 jisshuusei 'trainee', as part of linguistic landscapes in Japan.
 - 2) To infer the purpose for which these tags are used by relating them to car decals.

By analyzing these nameplates, as with many car decals and the maternity mark mentioned above, it becomes clear that Japanese society is a society that indirectly demands consideration from others by presenting some kind of linguistic text.

2.5 Research Questions

Upon entering a convenience store or other shop in Japan, one is greeted with the expression "irassyaimase," which requires no reply (Nishijima, 2020).² In addition, it is possible to notice that the greeter has a tag of some kind on his/her chest, 研修中 kenshūchū 'in training', as illustrated by Figure 6.



Figure 6

This figure shows a tag on clerk's chest, which may read "In training."

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² "Irassyaimase" is a greeting often heard in Japan upon entering shops or stores. In general, a greeting is to be responded to with an equivalent expression. However, a response to "irassyaimase" is not expected. According to Nishijima (2020), such a greeting is called an "unreplyable utterance" and is considered a characteristic communication style in the Japanese service industry.

The tag indicates that the shop clerks wearing it have insufficient skills. Upon seeing such a tag, one may ask oneself the following:

- 1) What do customers think when they see the clerks wearing such tags?
- 2) Why do they wear such tags? In other words, what do they expect of the customers?
- 3) Is the role or function of the "In training" tag the same as that of the sticker on cars or maternity mark, and so forth?

Pilot interviews were conducted to answer these research questions.

3. Methods

The "In training" tag involves three groups of people: (1) the customers seeing the employee wearing the tag, (2) the employee wearing the tag working in front of the customers, and (3) the manager instructing the employee to wear the tag. Therefore, these three types of individuals were interviewed.

A total of 20 students aged 19–22 attending my seminars and lectures at K University in K City, Japan, and a manager (in his 30s) working at a sports gym in K City were interviewed. The survey period was May 2022.

This was a qualitative survey. Qualitative research allows the researcher to gather specific information about the personal experiences of a small number of subjects, which in turn allows the researcher to understand their experiences better.

4. Results

4.1 A Survey to Customers

As a pilot study, I asked students attending my seminars and lecture what they would think if a clerk serving customers at a supermarket or drugstore cash register wore an "In-training" tag. The answers, translated into English, were as follows:

- "Yeah, it's not my lucky day. I got in line at the cash register of a clerk with an 'In training' tag. The clerk wearing the 'In training' tag must surely be slow at work. I can't help it. I'll have to be patient."
- "The clerk with the 'In training' tag must be slow at his/her job. I'll move to a different cash register and have another clerk serve me."
- "I don't know why the shop owner or manager allows the clerks in training to serve customers. It's a nuisance to the customers and they should be given the necessary skills before being allowed to serve customers."

The following points can be drawn from the comments above:

The respondents assume that shop assistants wearing the tag would be slow at work because they lack necessary skills. They will either put up with that clerk's customer service or try to avoid customer service by that clerk. In other words, the clerk is expected to be able to handle the job promptly. If a new clerk, one who has not yet acquired the necessary skills, serves a customer in such a situation, he or she may not be

able to meet these expectations adequately. Therefore, it can be assumed that the tag is put up as an excuse.

4.2 A Survey of Clerks Wearing the Tag

Furthermore, my students who actually worked part-time in convenience stores and drugstores were asked whether they have ever worn the "In training" tag, and those who answered "yes" were asked further about their role at the time. The answers, translated into English, were, for example, as follows:

- "I expect that customers can tolerate my slower work because of the tag."
- "I think that no one asks me anything thanks to the 'In training' tag and that customers should avoid me. It makes my job easier."
- "The tag 'In training' made me feel I wasn't very responsible for my job, but after the 3-month training period I had to take that tag off, and it made me feel more responsible for my job. In return, my hourly wage for part-time work increased."

The following three points can be drawn from the comments above:

My students were new to their job, so they were often confused and could not respond appropriately or accurately to enquiries of customers.

They consider the "In training" tag a badge to prevent such things from happening.

The tag affects the sense of responsibility of the person wearing it. The tag seems to play the role of reducing the sense of responsibility. In return, though, the person wearing it has the disadvantage of being paid less.

4.3 A Survey of a Manager Employing Clerks

In addition, I asked one manager who employs staff wearing tags in a sports gym about the tag role. The answer, translated into English, was as follows:

"This is for on-the-job training. The reason why we have them wear such tags is that other staff can immediately go to the person in training and offer help and guidance. The period for them to wear it is 2 months, and after 2 months, they are given a proper name plate to wear instead of that tag."

My response to the manager and his reply, translated into English, was as follows: The author:

"Unfortunately, I don't understand. If that is the case, I don't see the point of tagging them in such a way that customers can see them, as staff only need to be able to identify each other. Isn't OJT just an excuse for not training staff in advance, for ostensible reasons?"

The manager:

"I think you are right. I will discuss this matter with other staff in the near future and take the appropriate action."

The following point can be drawn from the conversation between the manager and me:

This is just an excuse to allow unskilled staff to serve customers without prior training. The reason they do not take the time for training is because the company thinks it is a waste of time. It must be said that the cost is passed onto customers as a nuisance because they are not treated as expected.

Interestingly, when I went to the gym the next week after I called the gym manager with my enquiry, I no longer saw any staff wearing such tags, and all staff members were now wearing the same name tag with their own names. This may mean that staff has discussed this question and the matter and the enquiry were dealt with.

5. Discussion

5.1 Communication Style with Tags

A tag that reads "In training" describes the status and competence of the employee wearing it. However, what it concretely means cannot be interpreted from this expression alone. Therefore, I met with three parties involved with this tag and interviewed them to find out what they thought of clerks wearing this tag from the customer's perspective, how they saw themselves and their customers from the perspective of the clerk wearing this tag, and on what basis they thought the manager would have the employee wear this tag. The results show that they can be interpreted differently. It was found that for customers, it is seen as indicating a person who should be avoided, and for employees wearing it, it is understood as something that allows them to disregard their responsibilities at work. For those who have them wear the tag, it is found to be an excuse to exempt customers from the disadvantage of being served without prior training.

How do management consultants and other experts view these tags? According to the management consultant Kazuyoshi Komiya, companies that have people wear "In training" or "newcomer" nametags are not afraid to have customers face people who cannot deal with them properly in the field of customer service, lack professionalism, and do not put the customer first (Komiya, 2019, 22–25). He states that this is because they are simply imposing their own circumstances on customers, who should be able to tolerate any unfamiliarity or rudeness, because it is based on the good of their company first.

What is of interest here is how this is understood and interpreted by those who see the tag and wear it. It is possible to say that the act of wearing this tag, like car decals and maternity marks, is based on a demand-for-consideration communication style that is common in Japan.

5.2 Relation to Car Decals

Unlike ordinary fixed public and commercial signs installed around the city, many decals on cars do not always have a clear meaning (Nishijima, 2022a, 2022b). For example,

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赤ちゃんが乗っています aka-chan-ga not-tei-masu
'Baby on board'
精密機械運搬中 seimitsu.kikai unpan.chū
'Precision machinery transported'
法定速度を守っています hōteisokudo-o mamot-tei-masu
'Legal speed limit observed'
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Upon seeing sentences such as these on vehicles, one might be tempted to say, "So what?" These signs indicate that understanding of messages on car decals requires readers' active interpretation. This tendency to express without clearly stating the speech intention is because, according to Hinds' classification, Japanese is classified as a "reader/hearer responsible" language in understanding (Hinds, 1987).

5.2.1 Hinds' Classification of Discourses

Hinds (1987) classifies English as a speaker (writer)-responsible language and Japanese as a listener (reader)-responsible language in terms of responsibility for understanding the discourse. This is easy to understand when considering typical utterances uttered in the same situation between English and Japanese. For example, if a student is speaking in a class and the speaker's voice is too low to be heard, the English speaker would say "Speak more loudly please," whereas the Japanese speaker would say 聞えません kikoemasen 'I can't hear you'. English clearly expresses the intention of the statement to the listener and actively tries to encourage them to take action, whereas Japanese only presents the situation and leaves the interpretation of the intention of the statement to the listener. In order for the Japanese statement "I can't hear you" in this example to be read as a request to speak louder, the listener needs to fill in the logical blanks. In this example, the speaker dares to express the situation of "I cannot hear you." The listener interprets this statement as revealing that the situation is unfavorable for the speaker. The listener then infers that the speaker is suggesting that the undesirable situation should be resolved and thinks of a solution. As a result, they realize that the problem can be solved by speaking louder and interpret the request as a request to speak louder. When certain information is only provided but the intention of the utterance is not clarified, a framework for interpreting it is required (Cf. Nishijima, 2010, p. 57).

5.2.2 Car Decal Interpretations

Let us now attempt to interpret the car decals mentioned above. It makes sense to assume that by applying the sticker, the driver is thereby trying to communicate some intention to the following drivers. If the intention is clearly expressed by the driver, this is not a problem, but if it is unclear, the driver of the following vehicle will attempt to interpret the intention of the driver of the preceding vehicle based on the information on the decal. Given that the original

role of a decal is to convey certain information or intention to the following driver straightforwardly, such unclear expressions would deviate from the original role of the sticker.

For example, then, how could the intention of a "baby on board" sticker be interpreted? When some of the author's colleagues were asked how this could be interpreted, many replied that the driver was trying to convey the intention of driving slowly. However, how can one explain the interpretation that statement of carrying a baby on board means to drive slowly? It is the driver's duty to restrain his/her baby in a baby seat or car seat if he/she is carrying a baby. If this is the case, then carrying a baby is not a reason for driving slowly. Nevertheless, people who see this sticker often interpret it as a declaration by the driver that he/she is driving slowly. Why is this? Here, we would like to explain the validity of this interpretation by comparing it with German society.

5.3 Relation to Traffic Situations in Japan

Basically, there are no car decals in Germany as seen above. There are no decals corresponding to the "Beginner driver's mark" such as illustrated by Figure 7 either.



Figure 7

Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, there are no decals that say "Baby on board" or "Precision machinery transported," or even "Legal speed is observed." No matter who is driving, whether a novice, an older individual, or otherwise, whether a baby or pregnant woman is in the car, or whether precision machinery or industrial waste is being transported, all drivers are expected to follow the relevant traffic rules on public roads regardless of the circumstances. Therefore, there is no need to put up a sticker to appeal for something. In other words, it is all about performing driving duties in accordance with the code of conduct of common traffic rules. Concerning behavior by the rules, it is easy to understand if we consider, for example, a football match. If a novice player is playing, he/she will not demand any consideration from the players around him/her, nor will the other players show him/her any consideration. Driving on public roads is similar: Once on a public road, everyone drives in compliance with the same traffic rules. This should be the norm. As long as one behaves in accordance with the rules, there is no point in having a sticker as a source of information.

However, in Japanese society, as in Germany, drivers are expected to drive according to the traffic rules on public roads, yet there are drivers who put decals on their vehicles. It can be assumed that they are trying to communicate something by doing so. Normally, there

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³ In Japan, the display of the beginner's mark is required by law (Article 71-5 of the Road Traffic Law, obligation to display beginner driver signs, etc.) for a total of 1 year after obtaining a regular vehicle driving license. Indeed, Germany does not have a beginner driver's mark, but France and the UK have equivalent marks, "A" and "P," respectively.

would be no need to state that they are carrying a baby, but they dare to put such a decal on. It may thereby suggest that they are "driving slowly."

This can be explained by considering the driving conventions of Japanese drivers on public roads. Although compliance with the law is required on Japanese public roads, it seems that the law takes precedence over the judgement of the traffic situation at the scene. For example, suppose you are driving on a national road having a 40 km/h speed limit. Rarely do drivers obey the specified speed limit. Most of the time, the vehicle is travelling at around 50 km/h, which is approximately 10 km/h faster. It can even be said that driving without observing the designated speed is the norm. This is paradoxically suggested by the presence of decals saying, "I am observing the legal speed limit." The reason why they drive at the specified speed can be assumed to be because it is common for drivers not to do so. There are even "Safe Driving Declaration Vehicles" decals. This too seems to be an expression assuming that the vehicle is not complying with traffic laws, such as not observing the legal speed limit, and in that sense is driving in an unsafe manner. It is also possible that such decals are intended to improve the image of transport companies.

In this light, it can be interpreted that the decals are used to suggest driving slowly and against the flow of traffic by presenting various reasons for involvement in an attempt to get drivers around them to understand such driving. These decals convey: "I apologize to all following vehicles for driving slowly and causing inconvenience. Please forgive me."

The concept of the demand for consideration represented by the beginner driver's mark can be discerned:

- Conveying the message of driving safely and observing the legal speed limit is inherently meaningless, as it is dictated by the rules.
- However, the fact that these are put up seems to assume, in effect, that it is habitual or normal to drive unsafely, in the sense that the legal speed is not observed.
- Decals seem to be an excuse not to drive in such "normalized" traffic conditions.
- This can be understood as an attempt to communicate that the expectations of those around them are not being met.

5.4 Tag Interpretations

The car decals we have tried to interpret above are clearly related to the tags "In training" and "Part-time job" that shopkeepers wear on their chest at supermarket and convenience store checkouts. This is because they have in common the desire for consideration (generosity) from customers.

6. Concluding Remarks

The pilot study has shown that the "In training" tags are demanding consideration (generosity) from customers or are being used as an excuse.

The "In training" tag, like some decals on vehicles including the beginner's mark, can be seen as an excuse for not providing "expected" adequate behavior (service) by informing customers in advance that they may cause inconvenience. Such tags, car decals, and even

maternity markings are rarely seen in other countries. This is a communication style characteristic of Japan, and it shapes the Japanese linguistic landscape.

Traditional linguistic landscape studies have been limited to fixed signs in public spaces. However, textual information can also be found on vehicles on the streets of Japan and on the chest of staff in shops and institutions. If such a variety of textual information forms the linguistic landscape of Japan, then, to properly capture the whole linguistic landscape of Japan, such textual information should be also investigated as part of the linguistic landscape.

This study is an attempt to extend the scope of linguistic landscape research.

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