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# **Ainu in the Linguistic Landscape: Reflections on Commodification and Authenticity from Akan, Hokkaido**

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**Abstract:** Linguistic-landscape research has increasingly been focusing on what minority languages on signage can tell us about the state or roles of those languages. This paper adds to the research through a linguistic-landscape analysis on how Ainu words on private signs in a small Hokkaido town are used to market authenticity in two tourist locations. Both settings — Ainu shops and a Japanese resort hotel — rely on the symbolic function of Ainu as the words are used to name shops and hotel spaces. The choices of Ainu words reflect endeavors to use mainly culture, nature and positive connotations to promote an authentic indexing of and connection to the Ainu. However, the linguistic landscape in the Ainu shopping street resonates mainly with the domestic tourist who can read the katakana of the opaque Ainu names. The hotel’s claims to authentically index Ainu culture are more dilute but its language commodification is more inclusive as the Ainu words appear in katakana and Roman letters with word glosses in Japanese and English.

**Key Words:** linguistic landscape, minority language, commodification

## **Introduction**

In the past two decades, research in linguistic landscapes — “the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs”<sup>1)</sup> — has succeeded in showing that it is a “useful and still vastly underexplored research tool for the study of multilingualism.”<sup>2)</sup> Much of the value of studying a linguistic landscape (hereafter LL) stems from its insights into, among other things, language attitudes, language policies, and ethnolinguistic vitality. Investigations have often looked at signage in settings with vibrant linguistic communities, such as Arabic and Hebrew, Spanish and English, and Russian and Ukrainian,<sup>3)</sup> but any consideration of how LL reflects status or vitality logically gravitates to the subject of minority languages. While studies of signage in minority languages are proving to be a productive area of research for scholars,<sup>4)</sup> this research often presup-

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1) Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p.25

2) Backhaus, 2007, p. 10

3) Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Hasan Amara, & Trumper-Hecht, 2006; Troyer, Cáceda & Giménez Eguibar, 2015; Pavlenko, 2010

4) See Marten, Mensel, & Gorter, 2012

poses a community of some linguistic vitality that is engaged in making its language more visible in order to shore up language maintenance, promote language revitalization, or enhance its image among speakers and non-speakers. The salience of an endangered language in the LL can, therefore, reflect a local initiative to expand domains of use, a community campaign to boost the prestige of the language, or official policies favorable to multilingualism.<sup>5)</sup>

Using visual displays of a minority language in the domain of tourism, however, complicates this narrative because, as Kallen notes, “it matters little to the tourist what language the local schools use or what language is used at meetings of a residents’ association.”<sup>6)</sup> In other words, a tourist — being, after all, transient — very much wants to enjoy the “landscape over the linguistic” without feeling compelled to decipher signs in a foreign language, and this “detached appreciation” is even more a norm in the case of minority languages. However, Kallen adds that the LL is a key part of any travel experience: “For the tourist who is in search of a feeling of being truly away from everyday experience, being greeted at the airport by signs in a foreign language is an immediate way to mark out the distance that has been travelled.”<sup>7)</sup> Thus, as long as a tourist is not inconvenienced or intimidated by the LL — a state of comfort Kallen terms “safe exoticism”<sup>8)</sup> — then the LL is essential to rendering the journey genuine. This touristic search for authenticity lends extra nuance to studies of LLs in minority languages.

It can be argued that a LL is most authentic when its symbolic and communicative content organically meets the needs of a targeted group of language users. However, if a language has a low number of speakers (and readers), then its displays in signage accessible to tourists can entail a commodification of language as part of *efforts* to authenticate a place. Previous studies have explored these designs in Western Europe, but we will be examining the tourist LL in the town of Akan in rural Hokkaido, Japan. Here, our minority language is Ainu, the original language of the indigenous inhabitants of Hokkaido. After decades of assimilationist policies and socioeconomic pressure, Ainu is severely endangered as a living language, and people who self-identify as Ainu are for the most part first-language speakers of Japanese who may understand a few words of Ainu. There is no large-scale movement on the part of the Ainu to expand the visibility of Ainu in cities or towns, but Ainu is salient in touristic LLs. Indeed, if one wants to listen to people actually speaking Ainu (in traditional performances) or to see the written language, the best places to visit are Ainu-related tourist attractions. Akan is a prime example of this. The town boasts two impressive displays

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5) Of course, there are gradients in levels of endangerment as well as in speakers’ levels of first-language literacy, but even token displays of a language with few speakers can serve as significant identity markers (Crystal, 2000)

6) Kallen, 2009, p.272

7) Kallen, 2009, p.271

8) Kallen, 2009, p.279

of Ainu signage, one a tourist commercial street called Ainu *Kotan* that features Ainu words in shop names, and the other a newly remodeled resort hotel that employs Ainu to label different sections of the hotel.

This paper will first provide a brief overview of recent research on the LL of minority languages in tourist locations as well as on the commodification of opaque displays of language for purposes of authenticity. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the Ainu language and its written forms before we move on to our linguistic-landscape analysis of Ainu *Kotan* and the hotel based on the author's visit to Akan in November 2015. This look at the LL of two delineated sites managed commercially by two different groups — an Ainu space for shopping and a Japanese<sup>9)</sup> *ryokan* (Japanese-style hotel) — adds to the descriptive research on how LL authors in different contexts commodify symbolic displays of local indigenous languages as instruments of authentication in order to appeal to domestic and at times international tourists. Indeed, the focus on the transient visitor is amplified because that is whom both street and hotel specifically target.<sup>10)</sup> Valuable insights will also emerge because the two LLs were designed decades apart. Finally, on a more tangent note, this study confirms that, while others have argued that the LL should be referred to more as the “cityscape” due to the copious signage of urban spaces,<sup>11)</sup> rural LLs are also very worthy of inquiry in this ever-growing field.

### The LL of Minority Languages in Tourist Settings

A desire for “gratifying authenticity” in the LL, whether a visitor can read it or not, can be fulfilled with a stroll through any commercially vibrant district from Tangiers to Taipei. As alluded to above, though, it takes more effort to find a LL in a minority language, a language that “lives in the shadow of a culturally dominant language.”<sup>12)</sup> Here, to first provide more context on the topic of minority languages, we can turn to Marten, Mensel, and Gorter, who distinguish between autochthonous (“indigenous”) minority languages (e.g., Cree in Canada) and migrant (“new”) minority languages (e.g., Vietnamese in the US).<sup>13)</sup> They also point to “unique” minority languages that exist only as minority languages (e.g., Romansh in Switzerland) and “local-only” minority languages that

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9) Of course, people who identify as Ainu are for the most part citizens of Japan, so the word “Japanese” can refer to them. However, in this paper, “Japanese” will refer to mainstream Japanese who ethnically do not identify as Ainu.

10) This is also a contrast with urban spaces that cater to local residents and general passersby as well as to members of a minority.

11) Gorter, 2006

12) Simpson, 2001, p. 579

13) Marten, et.al., 2012

are dominant languages in other states (e.g., Russian in Estonia). This study will focus on “unique autochthonous” minority languages, many of which are threatened with extinction. For clarity, we will simply refer to them as “minority languages” or “indigenous languages,” or if we want to emphasize their endangerment, “endangered languages.”

To begin our analysis, we need to affirm that, in its essence, a LL is, as Landry and Boorhis describe it, “a distinctive marker of the geographical territory inhabited by a given language community.”<sup>14)</sup> As such, the research has attracted scholars who are interested in analyzing the “distinctive” to uncover meanings and patterns behind language choices that, as we will see, can include exotic words not of “a given language community.” As a first step, though, Landry and Boorhis differentiate between government signs and private signs, which globally coincide or differ to varying degrees in the languages displayed. Landry and Boorhis define government signs as “public signs used by national, regional or municipal governments” such as “road signs, place names, street names, and inscriptions on government buildings”; private signs, on the other hand, “include commercial signs on storefronts and business institutions (e.g., retail stores and banks)...”<sup>15)</sup> These classifications have at times been critiqued as too simple.<sup>16)</sup> Nevertheless, they suit the purpose and scope of our paper as we will be limiting our discussions to the private signage of a resort town.

For our purposes as well, it is useful to consider Spolsky and Cooper’s three rules that influence how languages are chosen for a LL: 1) “write a sign in a language you know”; 2) “prefer to write a sign in a language which can be read by the people you expect to read it”; 3) “prefer to write a sign in your own language or in a language with which you wish to be identified.”<sup>17)</sup> The weight of these conditions can vary from sign to sign. Rules One and Two explain why communicative content — the “informational function”<sup>18)</sup> — appears with less frequency in the LLs of minority languages, especially if a language is losing speakers or if it has no standardized writing system. In addition, situations where a language community (e.g., Navajo, Guarani) is already literate in another language (e.g., English, Spanish) may inhibit LL displays in the minority language; such displays, especially those with communicative content, would seem unnecessary to members of this community.<sup>19)</sup> The language of the informative function is usually, of course, a dominant language or one that can be understood by an intended audience. On the other hand, the wish to be “identified” with

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14) Landry & Boorhis, 1997, p.25

15) Landry & Boorhis, 1997, p.26

16) Spolsky, 2009; see Ben-Rafael (2009) for his description of related “bottom-up” signs.

17) Cited in Spolsky, 2009, p.33

18) Landry & Bourhis, 1997

19) Spolsky, 2009

a certain language, as expressed in the third rule, suggests how the LL can serve a more “symbolic function” where it “can contribute most directly to the positive social identity of ethnolinguistic groups.”<sup>20)</sup>

Rule Three, then, explains why some lexical items appear on LLs even if many readers cannot understand them. Although this can account for the signage in minority languages, opacity in displayed writing is also observed with prestige languages that index notions of high culture or a cosmopolitan ambiance.<sup>21)</sup> For example, Haarman argues that the English and French seen in Japanese advertisements often function as “ethnosymbols” that serve largely to elicit positive emotions, a trend he has termed “impersonal multilingualism.”<sup>22)</sup> Impersonal multilingualism is particularly salient in the proper names that appear in LLs because, Edelman points out, “As proper names such as shop names and brand names do not have the purpose of transmitting factual information, they can easily be written in a language that is not used or fully understood by the audience.”<sup>23)</sup>

The dynamics of impersonal multilingualism and the use of promotional symbolism intuitively lead us to the centrality of the LL in any tourist’s quest for a genuine experience abroad. Indeed, Kallen’s 2009 study of tourist LLs in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland identifies a key tourist need that can affect how local establishments design their LL: a “need for an authentic experience of place, to see the ‘real’ foreign land.”<sup>24)</sup> Unless a sign’s message has some pertinent information for them, and as long as they can negotiate a place without difficulty, tourists can be content to appreciate the “look and feel” of a LL without concerning themselves about the semantic content. The LL in an unfamiliar language is precisely part of what authenticates the venture.

It should be emphasized here that a firm grasping of authenticity is notoriously evasive. Lacoste, Leimgruber, and Breyer affirm that authenticity, especially in sociolinguistics, is socially constructed and negotiated, which makes it “an adaptive and flexible concept.”<sup>25)</sup> In discussing authentic speakers, for example, they add that “Any form of authenticity... is subject to evaluation and implies a certain degree of approbation.”<sup>26)</sup> Authenticity, then, entails a certain “eye-of-the-beholder” quality that must still meet with a certain level of approval. In turning to authenticity in tourism, Taylor argues that:

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20) Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p.27

21) Backhaus, 2007

22) Haarman, 1986, p.109

23) Edelman, 2009, p.151

24) Kallen, 2009, p.275

25) Lacoste, Leimgruber & Thiemo Breyer, 2014, p.9

26) Lacoste, et.al., 2014, p.9

Authenticity in the present must pay homage to a conception of origins. In this way, tourism sites, objects, images, and even people are not simply viewed as contemporaneous productions, or as context dependent and complex things in the present. Instead, they are positioned as signifiers of past events, epochs, or ways of life.<sup>27)</sup>

Thus, notions of authenticity can shift over time but at a certain point in time they should be anchored to an original form to be considered authentic. At its most basic, a search for authenticity implies a quest for the “real.” This paper will not delve into an in-depth examination of what passes for authentic, but we should point out that the Ainu are, of course, no strangers to this discourse. Irimoto, for example, examines the arguments surrounding the authenticity of Akan’s annual *Marimo* Festival. This festival did not exist before 1950, when it was first held by incorporating elements of Ainu culture to promote protection of a rare spherical algae, but since then it has grown to become a major Hokkaido tourist event that today celebrates, among other aspects, Ainu reverence for nature. When it first started, some Ainu characterized the festival as inauthentic while others emphasized that all ceremonies considered authentic had to start somewhere. Irimoto argues that the festival is now generally seen to authentically represent the residents (Ainu and non-Ainu) of Akan.<sup>28)</sup>

For this paper’s notions of authenticity, we will be taking our cues from Moriarty’s investigation of the LL in a small town in Ireland.<sup>29)</sup> Moriarty found that the commodification of Irish in the LL helped to authenticate the town as being a part of the “real” Ireland. Overall, the Irish was often prominently displayed and was used symbolically and communicatively in the signage of craft stores, souvenir shops, pubs and restaurants. Thus, it served as an important index of Irishness to both residents and tourists. The circumstances of Irish and Ainu are quite distinct (more on the Irish LL below), but to keep things simple, this paper will focus on how LL displays in Ainu attempt to authenticate a connection to the Ainu or to “Ainu-ness.”

In summary, a chief starting point for this paper is that the look of an entire LL or the appearance of certain words can serve to market a place as “the real thing” to tourists. Leeman and Modan, for example, note that “Language’s status as a readily identifiable index of ethnicity and cultural authenticity casts it as a selling vehicle par excellence.”<sup>30)</sup> They have studied how signs in unfamiliar languages and scripts have been key to adding authenticity to “themed ethnoscapescapes” such

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27) Taylor, 2001, p.9

28) Irimoto, 2004

29) Moriarty, 2015

30) Leeman & Modan, 2010, p. 190

as Chinatowns in North America. While some ethnic Chinese (usually first-generation) may be able to read these signs, most visitors to the districts cannot. For them, the signs are not meant to be understood. Rather, the Chinese characters are there to be aesthetically pleasing and culturally genuine. The LLs then serve as “strategic tools” to enrich the experience of the visit.<sup>31)</sup>

Studying the presence of minority languages in the LLs of tourist sites assumes some level of socioeconomic development where the linguistically dominant engage in leisure and are comfortable with multilingualism.<sup>32)</sup> Thus, much of the recent research in this area looks at the more endangered languages of Western Europe, particularly in the British Isles. A number of works have discussed the promotional value of displaying Scottish Gaelic and Welsh for tourism,<sup>33)</sup> and other studies have noted the relative prominence of Irish in the private signage of towns and cities frequented by tourists in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>34)</sup> These studies did find informative content in Irish for local residents in business and entertainment establishments, but much of the Irish was used in proper names or for folkloric references.<sup>35)</sup> For example, Thistlethwaite and Sebba’s study of the LL of a medium-sized town in Ireland presents a number of case studies where the Irish is used primarily in shop names with some semantic referencing to the type of establishment. For instance, *Scéal eile* (“another story”) is the name on the facade of a bookshop (also labeled in English as such), *Ocras* (“hungry”) appears on a café front, and *Seoidín* (“little gem”) marks a jewelry store.<sup>36)</sup> Even shops that exhibited informative content often displayed a matching English translation that mimicked the Irish in design and relative position, so observers could intuitively guess what the Irish meant. These scholars agree that a core reason for the presence of these Celtic languages in the signage, particularly in that of private establishments, is to authenticate local identities for residents and tourists.

On the other side of the North Sea, symbolic usage of the Sami language has been examined by Puzey who mentions how the Norwegian city of Tromsø had used Norwegian-Sami text in the logo to promote a bid for the 2018 Winter Olympics.<sup>37)</sup> The city had also proposed bilingual signage for

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31) Leeman & Modan, 2010, p. 183

32) Recent anecdotal evidence, however, does point to increased commodification of indigenous languages in other places around the world, such as in Latin America.

33) Hornsby & Vigers, 2012; Puzey, 2012

34) Because the government of Ireland requires that some public signage be in Irish, it is less difficult to find the language in public signs such as road signs.

35) Kallen, 2009; Moriarty, 2012, 2015, Thistlethwaite & Sebba, 2015; Irish, in this sense, differs from many other languages that are also considered endangered: It enjoys prestige as an official language in Ireland, it is studied for 12 years in school, and there are active mediums where second-language learners can listen to or read Irish. In other words, the majority of Irish people can read and understand Irish words to different degrees.

36) Thistlethwaite & Sebba, 2015, pps.38–41; incidentally, *scéal eile* and *ocra* would be understood by most Irish.

37) Puzey, 2012

event venues and other Olympic sites. In Sweden, Salo describes examples of how decorative Sami is used in shop names and advertisements with most informative content in Swedish and English. As in the British Isles, the minority language is valued in the tourist LL for its exotic appeal.<sup>38)</sup>

These studies bring up one challenge about investigating LLs in minority languages: When does an outsider identify a minority language in a local LL? In the cases above, it is quite easy for an English-speaking tourist to perceive the Irish in the LL, or for a Norwegian or Swedish to recognize that a word in a sign is probably Swami (stylized fonts and decorative pictograms sometimes help as well). In contrast, an international visitor to Dublin who cannot read English can appreciate the signage in Dublin as the authentic LL of an Irish city, but the tourist would not be able to single out the Irish words. Similarly, to a monolingual English speaker in Cuzco, Peru, any words written in Quechua would be invisible amid the Spanish-language signs. Thus, we need to emphasize that in this paper, signage in a minority language possesses utility as an authentic marker when a tourist can reasonably conclude that a sign does indeed display that language.

Finally, we need to mention that, of course, displaying minority languages on signs designed to please tourists can be contentious, even if native speakers can appreciate the meanings. For example, Thistlethwaite and Sebba bring up the point that commodification can complicate what exactly is authentic when local actors design signs that primarily target either the resident or the tourist. In considering the motivations of the local authors who make the signs, Thistlethwaite and Sebba question whether the written Irish that emerges from home-grown affection for the language is more authentic than the ornamental Irish that is aimed at the sightseer (on the outside, the signs by themselves defy easy identification but the behind-the-scenes motivations are nevertheless different).<sup>39)</sup> In addition, Salo cautions that in the case of Sami, these LL displays can actually dampen revitalization efforts by accentuating the language's diminished standing.<sup>40)</sup> These arguments are worthy of study, but penetrating questions about authenticity and the empowerment of linguistic minorities are outside the goals of this paper.<sup>41)</sup>

## **The Ainu Language and Its Written Forms**

Ainu is a language isolate whose different dialects used to be spoken by the indigenous inhabitants of the Kurile Islands, the southern part of Sakhalin, and Japan's northern island of Hokkaido.

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38) Salo, 2012

39) Thistlethwaite & Sebba, 2015

40) Salo, 2012

41) See Ohtsuka (1999) and Hiwasaki (2000) for a balanced discussion on the pros and cons of promoting Ainu culture through tourism.

The Hokkaido dialects are the ones that survived into the late 20th century. Estimating the present number of people who identify as Ainu entails guesswork as no official census figures exist. Figures of about 25,000 are based on former surveys conducted in Hokkaido, but as these exclude people living in the rest of Japan as well as Ainu who hide their identity, the real number could be double that or more.<sup>42)</sup>

It is generally agreed that the basic elements of Ainu culture had emerged by the 13th century. The Ainu lived from hunting, gathering, and fishing, and they also traded throughout the region. Relations with the Japanese to the south developed through a series of trade networks that spurred Japanese settlements along the southern edges of Hokkaido in the 15th century. In the Tokugawa Era (1602–1868), Ainu along the coast came under the economic dominance of the Japanese governing clan, but the Ainu living inland were little affected culturally and linguistically. Major changes came after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 when the Japanese government formalized claims to Hokkaido and encouraged settlement and development in its northern frontier. Ainu were driven off traditional lands and forced to become farmers on lands of poor quality. Hunting, fishing, and cultural practices were prohibited. Japan increasingly adopted assimilationist policies towards the Ainu, and intense pressures against the Ainu language began in 1898 with the introduction of required schooling in Japanese that prohibited the speaking of Ainu. These policies were devastating for the vitality of the Ainu language throughout the 20th century as, in tandem with other forms of discrimination and societal pressures, less and less Ainu passed on their language to members of the next generations.<sup>43)</sup>

Political activism from the 1970s, however, eventually sparked a resurgence of identity awareness and assertion, which to some extent extended to language. In the 1980s, for instance, the first Ainu-language school was established in one Hokkaido town and radio language courses were inaugurated.<sup>44)</sup> Continued pressure and appeals resulted in tangible outcomes for the Ainu language. A national law was passed in 1997 that, among other items geared for cultural promotion, recognized the cultural value of the Ainu language. In line with this, the law provided funding for such revitalization efforts as the production of pedagogical materials, speech contests, language-teacher training, and the establishment of more language classes in Tokyo and Hokkaido, and in higher education.

Progress has continued to advance in a variety of fronts. In 2008, the Japanese government passed a resolution officially recognizing the Ainu as an indigenous minority for the first time,

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42) Maher, 2001

43) Heinrich, 2012

44) Maher, 2001

recognition that was finally made law in 2019. Nevertheless, the Ainu language of today is extinct as a substantive means of daily communication.<sup>45)</sup> There are no longer any native speakers, and the Ainu activists, performers, and scholars who can speak or understand the language with different degrees of fluency are second-language learners; overall, the dominant language of speech and literacy for the Ainu is Japanese. Efforts to learn and revive the language have boosted awareness and numbers of learners, resulting in, for example, impressive recitations of lengthy traditional poems in speech contests. Still, this has for the most part resulted in greater knowledge of Ainu vocabulary and traditional story-telling rather than communicative competence. Indeed, listening to radio language lessons of Ainu, the observer will find that they focus more on cultural content and explanations *about* the language over practical activities to motivate speaking. In addition, more non-Ainu Japanese study the language than Ainu themselves.<sup>46)</sup> In the end, many Ainu accept that they can be Ainu without Ainu.<sup>47)</sup>

Ainu had a rich tradition of oral literature but no writing system. Even today, there is no standardized orthography, although there are conventions for writing Ainu. The first substantive word lists and glossaries of Ainu terms were first produced in the 17th-18th centuries by Japanese and foreign explorers writing in the Japanese katakana syllabary, Roman letters, and the Cyrillic alphabet.<sup>48)</sup> In the late 19th century, a major grammar and dictionary were published by an English missionary in which the Ainu terms appeared in Roman letters. Since then, ethnic Ainu and academic scholars of different nationalities have written the Ainu language in Roman letters or in a modified katakana script, or in both systems in parallel (second-language learners of Ainu tend to favor katakana while linguists prefer Roman letters<sup>49)</sup>). Much of what is written in Ainu consists of transcriptions of oral narratives, although original content is also published in a newsletter.<sup>50)</sup>

In considering the state of Ainu today, we should not disregard the previously mentioned motivations for promoting LLs in a minority language; as indicated above, the language is undergoing a revival among second-language learners, and more written displays of the language are undoubtedly a manifestation of this. Still, much of the visual Ainu is found in centers of cultural tourism. The Ainu and their culture have become part of the tourist iconography of Hokkaido, and this has carried over into scattered displays of symbolic Ainu words throughout the prefecture (there

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45) Shibatani, 1990; Heinrich, 2012; Refsing, 2014

46) Nakagawa, 1999; Gottlieb, 2005

47) Maher, 2005

48) Tamura, 1999

49) Nakagawa, 1995

50) Refsing, 2014; the name of the newsletter is the *Ainu Times*

are no laws in Japan regulating multilingual language use on private signage<sup>51)</sup>). Indeed, Ainu words also appear in settings with no evident link to the Ainu: A major outlet mall near New Chitose Airport is called *Rera* (“wind”), express trains of Japan Railways carry the name *Kamuy* (“god, spirit”), and various shops and nature parks bear Ainu names. Ainu words also appear in advertisements as for some time Hokkaido businesses and tourist agencies have employed eye-catching words to sell products and souvenirs.<sup>52)</sup> For example, companies have commodified the word *pirka* (“good, beautiful”) to promote a variety of products from potato snacks to restaurant menu items. Informative content in Ainu, on the other hand, is extremely rare because of the language’s endangerment, although *Pirka Kotan* (“beautiful village”), an Ainu cultural center near Sapporo, has halls, meeting rooms, and restrooms labelled trilingually as such in Ainu (both scripts), Japanese, and English.

### The Ainu LL of Ainu *Kotan*

For this paper, a linguistic landscape survey entailing a “photography and visual analysis” was conducted at Ainu *Kotan* and a hotel (next section) in the town of Akan.<sup>53)</sup> About 300 photographs were taken at the two locations. While there are a few similar souvenir stores in adjacent streets, the boundaries of Ainu *Kotan* encompass the stores, the museum, and the theater specified below (as mapped out in the website for Ainu *Kotan*).<sup>54)</sup> As the Ainu community and hotel are compact, the corpus of signs is small. There has been extensive discussion about what constitutes a single LL item or sign,<sup>55)</sup> but here we will focus on the Ainu words (and their glosses) employed by the LL authors in our settings. No interviews were conducted with shop owners or hotel staff, but a number of inquiries were made to people who attended the author when opportunity allowed.

Akan, a town in rural eastern Hokkaido, is a part of the port city of Kushiro. Its hot springs and stunning location on the shores of Lake Akan make it one of Hokkaido’s most iconic destinations. According to municipal online sources, the town of Akan had a population of about 6,400 in 2005<sup>56)</sup> and the Akan vicinity registered hotel stays for about 1.6 million tourists in 2018, of which about 116,000 were non-Japanese.<sup>57)</sup> The historical development of Hokkaido saw the area become an

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51) Peter Backhaus, personal communication

52) Hiwasaki, 2000

53) Hult, 2009, p.90

54) <akanainu.jp>

55) See Huebner, 2009

56) Kushiro City website. <<https://www.city.kushiro.lg.jp/common/000017304.pdf>>

57) Kushiro City website. <<https://www.city.kushiro.lg.jp/common/000137409.pdf>>

early center for salmon industries, sulfur mining, and forestry, but these activities declined with the founding of Akan National Park in 1934.<sup>58)</sup> Significant tourism to Akan had commenced from the 1920s. The area was not historically known for permanent Ainu settlements, but with the rise of the tourist economy, greater numbers of Ainu migrated seasonally to Akan to produce wooden carvings and handicrafts for Japanese-owned souvenir stores. By the 1940s, the Ainu themselves had opened a few stores in the town.<sup>59)</sup>

It was in the post-war years that tourism to Hokkaido and Akan boomed with economic growth and better road access. Throughout the prefecture, as the Ainu and their exotic culture complemented the popular image of Hokkaido as a place of great nature, Ainu-themed shops, reconstructed villages, and cultural festivals were created to meet demand. These activities were also strategies of the Ainu for economic and cultural survival. Ainu *Kotan* itself came about because in 1959 a major forestry business granted land to the Ainu in answer to their appeal for a site where they could work on souvenir production (and benefit the local economy).<sup>60)</sup> The street is located not far from the lake shore and the center of town. Despite the name *kotan*, denoting a traditional “village,” the architecture of Ainu *Kotan* is that of a contemporarily conventional townscape in Japan. It is a small street on a gentle slope lined on two sides with Ainu-run stores, mostly souvenir and handicraft stores plus a restaurant and coffee shop, and their attached households. The shops themselves numbered about 24 units in 2015; most are attractively decorated with Ainu motifs, carvings of wooden figures, deer antlers, and other works that showcase a mix of Ainu craftsmanship and rustic decor. There are also displays of a traditional canoe and carved tree trunks inspired by the indigenous totem poles of North America. At the top of the slope, visitors can find the Ainu Cultural Heritage Museum *Cise* (“house, building”) and a theater called *Ikor* (“treasure”) that opened in 2012 and hosts Ainu dance and music performances. According to recently installed display boards in the museum, Ainu *Kotan* “is currently home to around 100 people.” Today, Akan is one of four prominent Ainu communities in Hokkaido.<sup>61)</sup>

Overall, the store facades at Ainu *Kotan* are abundantly adorned with durable wooden and metal signs as well as temporary paper posters and the like that announce a variety of services and information in Japanese. The words are either carved, hand-painted, or printed, depending on the material. What stands out most is the conspicuous use of Ainu — the words often have the largest or most centrally placed lettering — in the shop names. This modest shopping street boasts one of the

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58) Irimoto, 2004

59) Cheung, 2005

60) Cheung, 2005

61) Hiwasaki, 2000; Ainu *Kotan* represents an Ainu community, although it should be mentioned that non-Ainu Japanese live there as well due to intermarriage (Cheung, 2005)

most impressive displays of commercial signage in an indigenous minority language. Most Ainu names appear painted and/or carved on individual wooden signboards. In one shop, the katakana characters (ピリカ) for the *Pirka* shop appear as three large wooden kana placed between vertical beams. Of these two dozen shops, 17 were found to use Ainu words in katakana script in their shop names; the rest of the stores exhibited store names in Japanese without any Ainu. No names were prominently displayed in Romanized Ainu or Romanized Japanese. The Ainu words included a couple of items derived from literal translations of Japanese names and one word whose meaning could not be confirmed through dictionary sources (these items are not listed in the table below). Table 1 presents a selected listing of 14 Ainu-language store names from the LL with the author's Romanized transliterations and glosses based on print dictionaries or online sources.<sup>62)</sup>

Focusing on the words themselves, we can see that many of the names have apparently been chosen for their cultural or ecological currency, and in this sense they are strong markers of Ainu identity. *Kotan* is the word for “village,” as we have seen, and three names refer to items of Ainu oral traditions: *oyna* (heroic poetry), *yukar* (hero epic tales) and *korpokkur* (mythical small people). Other words reference the local natural environment: *cikisani* (a type of elm tree), *icinke* (“turtle”), *imosir* (“our land”), *cikap set* (“bird nest”), and *matnesir* (name of local mountain).

**Table 1** Selected Listing of Ainu-Language Shop Names in Ainu *Kotan* with Glosses

Store Name on Frontage	Ainu Word in Roman Letters*	Gloss
チカ ッ プ セ ッ	<i>cikap set</i>	“bird nest”
チキ サ ニ	<i>cikisani</i>	“elm tree”
チニ タ	<i>cinita</i>	“dream”
エポ エポ	<i>epo-epo</i>	exclamation of surprise
ハポ	<i>hapo</i>	“mother”
イチン ゲ	<i>icinke</i>	“turtle”
イ・モシ リ	<i>i·mosir</i>	“our land”
コ タ ン	<i>kotan</i>	“village”
コロ ボ ッ ク ル	<i>korpokkur</i>	mythical small people
マ ツ ネ シ リ	<i>matnesir</i>	“female place” (name of local mountain)
オイ ナ	<i>oyna</i>	traditional heroic poetry
ピリ カ	<i>pirka</i>	“good, beautiful”
ポロ ン ノ**	<i>poronno**</i>	“many”
ユ ー カ ラ	<i>yukar</i>	hero epic tales

\*Variant spellings for /tʃi/ and /ʃi/ are *ci/chi* and *si/shi*, respectively (Shibatani, 1990).

\*\*Eating establishment

Finally, another set of names has positive connotations: *pirka* (“good, beautiful”), *cinita* (“dream”),

62) Kayano, 2007; Ainu Museum, online Ainu Language Archive <<http://ainugo.ainu-museum.or.jp>>

*hapo* (“mother”), *epo-epo* (exclamation of surprise), and *poronno* (“many”). The word *poronno* can also be semantically tied to the coffee shop setting, bringing to mind pleasant notions of a tasty abundance. In the case of the *Epo-epo* shop, the attendant informed me that he had chosen the name because he enjoyed the sound of it, which suggests that some names have been chosen because they are audibly pleasing.

As expected, Japanese is the language employed for informational content. Many of the Ainu terms appear together with Japanese words that denote the type of establishment. For example, the shops with the names *Cinita*, *Oyna*, and *Matnesir* appear with the Japanese word *mingeiten* (民芸店, or “handicraft shop”), as in *Cinita Mingeiten* (チニタ民芸店); *Hapo* and *Icinke* appear with the Japanese kanji for “store” (*mise*, 店). Otherwise, most of the Japanese expresses greetings and invitations to browse, or it advertises about the nature of the stores’ goods (wooden carvings, accessories, traditional attire), services (discounts, parking, food, lessons in embroidery and traditional music), and performances at the nearby theater. Thus, these displays in Japanese reflect the dominance of Japanese as the language of wider communication.

As we can see, the Ainu signage in Ainu *Kotan* works to index Ainu identity in an Ainu setting, and thus the shops names are vehicles of authenticating Ainu *Kotan* as a genuine Ainu space (a feature we also saw in our discussions of European LLs). However, because of the language’s exoticness and the authors’ script choices, different tourists will discern these expressions of authenticity to different degrees.

For those few visitors who understand the Ainu, the meanings of these words echo the promotional name choices made by shop owners around the world. The themes of culture, nature or agreeableness offer innumerable possibilities, and a pub or gift store with the name “Bird Nest” would probably not draw second glances in an English-speaking county. Thus, somebody with a minimal background knowledge of Ainu culture or with exposure to commercial use of Ainu words, might understand the less obscure words such as *yukar* and *pirka* and appreciate their use in a place that is both culturally and commercially identified as Ainu.

Although the tourist who knows some Ainu might get the most out of the LL, the Ainu names are also of authentic import to the tourist whose first language is Japanese (or to the tourist literate in Japanese). In this case, the private signage mirrors the impersonal multiculturalism seen in ethnoscapes around the world, or in the decorative French and English used in commercial signs, because the Japanese tourist can pinpoint the Ainu. Because of the context and the writing systems used, the average Japanese tourist can discern that the eye-catching but unfamiliar words in katakana are in Ainu, and that they are probably commodified to impart some positive quality. The katakana script, after all, often marks words in Japanese as foreign loans. The tourist can make out

the sounds of the words, but the Ainu is as opaque as the aforementioned Irish and Sami is to non-speakers of those languages. This recalls Kallen's safe exoticism: Most domestic tourists will not understand any of the Ainu shop names, and they are not expected to, a situation typical in many foreign organic settings. Thus, the opacity augments the authenticity.<sup>63)</sup>

In contrast, to the overseas tourist who cannot read Japanese and who cannot distinguish katakana from hiragana, the Ainu words will be mostly invisible. There are few signs in Roman letters at Ainu *Kotan*, most of them in English. These include wooden signs featuring "Ainu Kotan," "Lake Akan," "Wooden Folk Craft," and "Traditional Ainu Foods" as well as a sign saying "Ainu Kotan Street" at the upper end of the street. In addition, the store *Imoshir* does have small Romanized transliterations under the corresponding katakana, but all in all, there is a paucity of Roman lettering on the street. As the Ainu names blend in with the Japanese, the Ainu language seems to be of secondary importance for commodifying Ainu *Kotan* to the international visitor. An online search of old photographs of Ainu *Kotan* confirms that, indeed, Ainu store names have primarily been displayed in katakana from its inception. The LL may thus date the general design of shop frontage as from a time when the vast majority of visitors to Akan were domestic tourists, and when limited utility was seen in exposing visitors to the language.<sup>64)</sup> The LL at Ainu *Kotan* can still communicate authenticity to international tourists, but the Ainu remains indistinguishable to them in essentially a Japanese LL.

As we can see, in Ainu *Kotan* the Ainu language is used for tourist-related business names much as other indigenous languages are employed in shop fronts around the world. To the extent that Ainu *Kotan* represents a shopping street where Ainu live and work, but where visitors can also browse and shop and attend a local theater, the Ainu LL succeeds in highlighting the genuine nature of the setting to the tourist. However, this is most effective for those few who can understand the Ainu or to the tourists who understand Japanese.

### **The Ainu LL of a Local Hotel**

Our next location, a short walk from Ainu *Kotan*, is not an Ainu space. It is a recently restored hotel that opened in 2012 and is managed by a major Japanese hotel company that oversees several other hotels throughout Hokkaido. The hotel is a popular upscale *ryokan*-style establishment that features hot spring baths, a treatment salon and spa, a buffet restaurant, and spectacular vistas of

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63) It should be noted that tourists who purchase items from certain stores can get shopping bags decorated with Japanese glosses for the shop's names.

64) The new theater, *Ikor*, does have its Ainu name displayed in both katakana and Roman letters.

Lake Akan and the volcanic cone of Mt. Oakandake.

A key attraction of the hotel is the opportunity for guests, as the Japanese-language brochure advertises it, to “be exposed to” (Japanese *fururu*) Ainu culture. In part, this signifies that the hotel is extensively adorned with Ainu art, handicrafts, cultural items, and modern-day furnishings fashioned with Ainu motifs and cultural themes. For example, an arriving guest is greeted by a lobby that displays naturalistic wooden sculptures of native wildlife and Ainu in traditional costumes, as well as by nearby galleries that exhibit cultural artifacts (including numerous mountings of traditional garments and embroidered textiles) and artistic works. The website of the hotel itself promotes this first encounter: “Guests... are first greeted in the lobby by the sight of bear wood carvings made by local wood carvers in Lake Akan and you are fascinated by beautiful ‘AINU’ art works. ‘AINU’ are Hokkaido’s indigenous people who have unique culture and customs that we are respected them [sic].”<sup>65)</sup> In addition, the guest-room decor is Ainu-themed, and the walls of the hot spring bathrooms are decorated in stylized images of traditionally attired Ainu living in harmony with nature. In fact, many of the images in the hotel, from carvings to paintings to wall murals, portray scenes from an idealized past. Ainu culture has been clearly commodified, but the hotel is also known for working with the local Ainu. For instance, there was collaboration with Ainu in the hotel’s design and ornamentation. The hotel also arranges for Ainu to deliver evening talks to hotel guests on Ainu history and culture, it has supported Ainu artists whose works grace the lobby and galleries, and it has donated funds for renovations to Ainu *Kotan* and the *Ikor* theater.<sup>66)</sup>

Cultural commodification extends to language as well. A distinctive feature of the hotel is its abundant use of Ainu words to name different sections and services within the hotel (22 in all). The texts often appear in elegant panels and name plates, often bearing related images with Ainu designing. These signs are clearly posted at the entrance areas to the spaces. Another design decision is that Ainu words are displayed in both katakana script and Roman letters, with the katakana version appearing jointly with supplemental Japanese identifying the type of space, and the Romanized Ainu appearing with supplemental English. Furthermore, 13 of these 22 spaces are marked with additional glosses that explain the meanings of the Ainu words in Japanese and English. The Japanese glosses appear in smaller fonts usually below the Ainu word in katakana on the same panel; the English definition appears below the Ainu word in Roman letters. The Ainu names in Roman letters, the explanatory English, and the English glosses for these 13 space names are presented in Table 2 as they appear in the hotel’s signage. The content in English is largely repeated in the Japanese texts adjoining the Ainu in katakana.

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65) <<https://www.tsurugawings.com/en/about/>>

66) *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*. 5 July 2016. <<https://www.nikkei.com/articleDGXLZO04424560U6A700C1L41000/>>

**Table 2** Selected Listing of Romanized Ainu Names for Hotel Spaces plus English Content

Ainu Word in Roman Letters	Supplemental English on Sign (Author's Clarification)	English Gloss on Sign
<i>Hapo</i>	<i>Hokkaido buffet</i> (buffet restaurant)	" <i>HAPO</i> " is the Ainu word for "mother."
<i>Hurep</i> *	<i>Treatment room</i> (body, facial, foot-care salon)	" <i>Hurep</i> " is the Ainu word for "red thing."
<i>Irancarapte</i>	<i>Lobby gallery</i>	" <i>Irancarapte</i> " is the Ainu word for "hello."
<i>Korpokkur</i>	<i>Lounge area for après-bathing relaxation</i>	" <i>Korpokkur</i> " is the Ainu word for "small people."
<i>Kotan</i>	<i>Ainu kotan gallery</i> (exhibits of cultural items)	" <i>Kotan</i> " is the Ainu word for "village."
<i>Matnesir</i>	<i>Women's large communal bath</i>	" <i>Matnesir</i> " is the Ainu word for "Mt. Meakandake."
<i>Nipeki</i>	<i>Healing deck</i> (rest area)	" <i>Nipeki</i> " is the Ainu word for "light."
<i>Nitay</i>	<i>Wood carving gallery</i>	" <i>Nitay</i> " is the Ainu word for "forest."
<i>Pekampe</i>	<i>Outdoor shop</i>	" <i>Pekampe</i> " is the Ainu word for "water chestnut."
<i>Pinnesir</i>	<i>Men's large communal bath</i>	" <i>Pinnesir</i> " is the Ainu word for "Mt. Oakandake."
<i>Tampako</i>	<i>Smoking room</i>	" <i>Tampako</i> " is the Ainu word for "tobacco."
<i>Tekkup</i>	<i>Wings bridge</i> (corridor link with sister hotel)	" <i>Tekkup</i> " is the Ainu word for "wings."
<i>Usa</i>	<i>Pillow gallery &amp; shop</i>	" <i>Usa</i> " is the Ainu word for "variety."

\*Often used in reference to species of red wild berries.

In the words listed in Table 2, we can see some overlap in semantic categories (and words) between the hotel and Ainu *Kotan*. For example, some words in the hotel refer to cultural items, such as *kotan* and *korpokkur*, some reference nature [*nipeki* ("light"), *nitay* ("forest"), *pekampe* ("water chestnut")], and there are two toponyms (*Matnesir*, *Pinnesir*). The range of categories is also expanded with Ainu terms for "tobacco," "variety," "wings," and "hello." Again, as in the frontage at Ainu *Kotan*, the Ainu is largely symbolic with informational content in the dominant tourist languages of English and Japanese.

In contrast with Ainu *Kotan*, the Ainu language's commodification in the hotel is much more salient as the LL targets both Japanese and international tourists (at least those who can read English). First, hotel guests can see that the space names displayed actually are Ainu because the glosses identify the language used. Second, the bilingual glosses allow guests to understand the meanings of the Ainu terms. Third, and quite intriguingly, many of the Ainu names semantically suit their assigned spaces in the hotel layout. For example, the lobby with artistic carvings of wood has

appropriately been given the name *Nitay* (“forest”), and several cultural items are on display in the gallery *Kotan. Hapo* (“mother”) has been used to indicate a place of eating, evoking images of home cooking, and the toponyms of the local “male” and “female” mountains denote the hot-spring baths for men and women. In addition, *irankarapte*, a greeting, is the name of the reception area, and a range of pillow styles are on offer for guests to rent at the space marked with the abstract term *Usa* (“variety”).

Thus, both Japanese and international guests are (obviously) the target audiences of a LL that advances the hotel’s multi-layered approach to promoting Ainu culture. There is no presence of Ainu to be authenticated in this Japanese-run hotel, but the LL complements the hotel’s Ainu furnishings in striving to authenticate both the hotel’s links to the Ainu and its *presence* in their ancestral lands. The hotel also commodifies the Ainu language by tweaking Kallen’s “safe exoticism” with bilingual signage and glossing. That is, the LL is still safe and exotic — guests will have no problem navigating the hotel — but the minority-language words are made transparent and the signage beckons guests to linger and reflect on the language. Whether the guests accept or not, the signs convey an educational undertone more in keeping with an ethnographic museum.

On the one hand, one can argue that the LL of Ainu *Kotan* is more authentic and more in line with the LLs found in other minority-language communities around the world where tourists are largely oblivious to the presence of the indigenous words or to their meanings. After all, the hotel’s connections to “Ainu-ness” are clearly more superficial. However, in touching on the instructive, the hotel’s LL authors reflect mainstream trends of presenting cultural information that seeks to inform in respectful tones, a trend possibly spurred by enhanced public sensitivity to issues of language endangerment (indeed, a national Ainu museum set to open in Hokkaido in 2020 will feature a special section for language). It is in the commodified Japanese space, then, where encountering the Ainu language is made more intimate.

## Conclusion

Employing endangered languages in signs whose audiences include non-speakers can entail a range of approaches and goals, some of which overlap with those involved in creating signage in more prominent languages. For example, a LL author of a place of business can aim to inform members of the minority community, as is the case with any thriving language, or the author can also aim to appeal to non-speakers, such as when non-speakers of English or French can appreciate the cosmopolitan-looking *Dreams* or *Rêves*. This study has attempted to focus on the ways the minority language Ainu has been commodified in LLs to appeal to tourists’ enthusiasm for displays

or enhancers of authenticity. The Ainu language is today seriously endangered, but in the domain of tourism it has stature as the language of the indigenous inhabitants of Hokkaido.

This paper has analyzed parts of the LLs of the community of Ainu *Kotan* and of a Japanese-owned hotel. Both sites exhibit Ainu words that reference culture, nature, places, and positive concepts. Given the language's dearth of speakers, a symbolic role unsurprisingly prevails as the words are used as names for souvenir shops and hotel sections, while explanatory or promotional content is in a dominant tourist language (Japanese or English). In addition, the words index Ainu identity or a connection to Ainu culture, and their expressions of pleasantness or culture, when understood, appeal to emotions.

However, tourists experience the Ainu signage in different ways in the two location. As shop fronts at Ainu *Kotan* bear unfamiliar Ainu names in katakana script, the words' Ainu origins — but not the meanings — are discernible to the average Japanese tourist. To the overseas visitor who cannot read Japanese, the Ainu names are for the most part invisible. The hotel's Ainu names, in contrast, can be read in both katakana and Romanized versions; they are displayed with space-identifying terms and glossing in Japanese and English, and many are semantically tied to the spaces they represent. As a result, the hotel's LL makes an effort to appeal to both Japanese and international visitors as they can more readily identify, understand, and appreciate the Ainu words.

The approach to displaying Ainu shop names at Ainu *Kotan* is similar to that of shop fronts in other parts of the word where proper names serve as identity markers to enhance the authenticity of a business or locality. The tourist here is “eavesdropper” and is not expected to understand what the words mean. On the other hand, the hotel is not an Ainu cultural space — some of its spaces actually resemble museum exhibits that recall a nostalgic past — but the signage suggests attempts to offset the hotel's cultural remoteness and its inherent Japanese-ness by a language commodification that offers an instructive encounter with the Ainu language.

This study highlights different approaches to commodifying a minority language for purposes of tourism in the context of Japan. In ethnically significant settings, one decision for both pertinent indigenous actors and outside businesses involves how to assure that visitors know the LL is the “real item.” The results of these choices may become more salient as more culturally informed approaches to tourism incorporate language into their designs, a development that resonates with poignancy and potential for the challenges of language endangerment.

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