

## Linguistic Landscape Theory in Language Learning

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### Abstract

*In this paper we attempt to explore how the theory of landscape can be applied to language awareness and language learning. We intend to draw conclusions from landscape, identity building and motivation theories and consider their application to language promotion and language learning.*

*As a way of case studies, we will be using material we have developed as part of three EU funded projects involving 12 EU countries, developed between 2005 and 2014. Material in 14 languages (incl. minority languages and languages in bilingual environment) were collected in urban environments and included: photos of symbols, signs and landscape of 15 cities and towns in Europe carefully selected based on a thematic typology, short videos and films in the same cities and towns, online games and printed publications (language learning and storytelling books). As part of three EU funded projects - Signs in the City and Beyond Signs in the City ([www.signsinthecity.net](http://www.signsinthecity.net)) and Tell me a Story ([www.tellmeastory.eu](http://www.tellmeastory.eu)) we have explored how the use of city signs and symbols (street signs, bar, restaurant, shop, banks, post office, graffiti and anything else 'printed' as part of a city) can tell a lot more about the culture than history ever could and can also be used as a means for language learning and language comparison.*

*Language sciences have no tradition of the study of landscape, which has rather been used in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, geography, architecture and the arts. Although language landscape is rapidly developing as a discipline this still remains an area which is underexplored as part of language motivation and language learning.*

*Linguistic landscape is a concept used in sociolinguistics and has been mostly related to multilingualism. Studies in this area are relatively recent but the linguistic landscape paradigm is growing rapidly. The languages used in public signs indicate what languages are locally relevant, or give evidence of what languages are becoming locally relevant (Shohamy 2010; Kasanga 2012).*

*Our research and methodology from EU project development having been tested in several EU countries demonstrates that there is clearly a case for interdisciplinary work in the area of language landscape in urban settings. City signs provide an easy, visual and clear way to promote language and culture while they also provide excellent material for language learning in 'real life' situations and indeed for comparative linguistic analysis. We will be drawing conclusions and present recommendations for further research and European collaboration in this field of study. These will include interdisciplinary approaches to research and link between academia and EU project management. We expect conclusions from our research can be applied to the development of business and training material for students, tourists and tour guides as well as promotional materials for local authorities and the tourism and language learning sectors.*

### Language landscape theory

The studies of linguistic landscape (LL) have been conducted for over 40 years, but it is only recently that there has been an increment of publications (Gorter 2013: 201). LL has developed as an area of study thanks to combining theories from sociology, linguistics, anthropology, cultural theory, cultural and identity studies, cultural geography and psychology.

The concept was first conceptualized by Landry and Bourhis (1997) in their seminal work on ethno linguistic vitality and signage in Canada. Both authors elaborated on the notion of LL, referring to the visibility of languages on objects that mark the public space in a given territory. Included in these linguistic objects are road signs, names of sites, streets, buildings, places and institutions as well as advertising billboards, commercial shop signs and even personal visiting cards.



As Gorter (2013: 196) suggests, 'although the boundaries of the field of linguistic landscape can be drawn precisely, ... the field can be delimited by emphasizing studies that have as the main focal point the analysis of language(s) displayed on signs in public space'. LL is seen as the scene where the public space is symbolically constructed (Ben-Rafaelet al., 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2008). The languages used in public signs indicate what languages are locally relevant, or give evidence of what languages are becoming locally relevant (Kasanga 2012). LL is becoming a useful method to understand the evolution of an urban space. LL signs describe the identity of a city and almost 'speaks the language' of its inhabitants at a moment in time. An important characteristic of urban LL is that it focuses on the study of both public and private signs, including those that are regularly observed in cities, such as street signs and the post office and some less common such as graffiti and art work.

Collective identity theory, using the notion of space in its formation, is particularly relevant to the study of linguistic landscape.

For the traditional and essentialist school of thought, identity is static and bounded within specific borders in such a way that the self is usually identified as never changing with reference to a negative and often hostile other. Examples of traditional identity building in a LL context would include national monuments and heritage buildings or symbols as part of an urban environment. A leader's statue, a national day commemorated on a street sign, a heroic monument are good examples of LL in a context of national identity building as part of essentialist identity building theory. According to this theory, belonging to the group is 'natural' and LL is a way of depicting that.

Rational constructivists moved further in discussing identity with relation to power, which dictates collective identity. This reasoning has a top down emphasis; elites promote their interests via the construction of identity. In LL terms wartime slogans and authoritative signs used during periods of oppression are good examples of rational constructivism. The use of Soviet propaganda posters are good examples of this type of LL.

Postmodernism arrived to put another perspective in LL and identity formation. For Derrida, meaning becomes a fleeting phenomenon that evaporates almost as soon as it occurs in written language or keeps transforming itself into new meanings rather than something fixed. In a LL context, think of a wall with constantly changing writing and graffiti, it can be interpreted in so many different ways, can lead to a series of different conversations and create all sorts of reactions and feelings of belonging (i.e. identity) or not.

Foucault's interest in heterotopias and marginalized groups focuses LL on a debate about difference and exclusion. Predominant migrant communities in an urban setting settle in with their culture, customs and languages and influence significantly the LL of that city. Look at New York's LL in downtown Manhattan, the Jewish quarter and the Chinatown and you can only see that notion of heterotopia and colorful pastiche, a term that has been commonly linked with postmodernism. Some early work on a specific form of linguistic landscape was done in cemeteries used by immigrant communities, some languages being carved 'long after the language ceased to be spoken' in the communities. In multilingual societies LL becomes more complex and diverse. As Gorter (2013: 191) pointed out, 'the study of linguistic landscape aims to add another view to our knowledge about societal multilingualism by focusing on language choices, hierarchies of languages, contact-phenomena, regulations, and aspects of literacy'.

Consequently, as identity evolves the LL evolves as well. A city's LL of today will be totally different to that of ten or twenty years ago. London's underground digital signs are the best example of the impact of technology. LL can also be applied to the study of competing scripts for a single language. For example, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, some signs in Mongolia were erected in the traditional Mongolian script, not just Cyrillic (Grivelet 2001).

Barni & Vedovelli (2013) suggest that linguistic landscapes are perceived as the most powerful indicator of diversity in a specific area and, for this reason, they are used by policy makers as an arena for political decisions. Linguistic landscape is also the most perceivable sign of diversity for passers-by, so that the diversity of languages and alphabets on display in certain areas, in particular those where immigrant communities are present, immediately perturbs passers-by. Thus, in order to reassure people, the diversity of languages and alphabets must be mitigated, covered or hidden, and decisions are taken by policy makers to do this.



## Case study on how the theory of linguistic landscape can be applied to language awareness and language learning

As part of three EU funded projects - *Signs in the City* and *Beyond Signs in the City* ([www.signsinthecity.net](http://www.signsinthecity.net)) and *Tell me a Story* ([www.tellmeastory.eu](http://www.tellmeastory.eu)), involving 12 EU countries, developed between 2005 and 2014, we explored how the use of city signs and urban symbols could tell a lot more about the culture of a place than history ever could and could also be used as a means for language learning and language comparison. The concept was based on the use of photography of a city's signs as a means of learning about the city's language. This involved taking pictures of street signs, graffiti, restaurant and bar menus and adverts, information on buildings and heritage places and famous and important incidents and people, and anything else 'printed' as part of a city. We conducted our research in 15 cities and towns in Europe – places with different historical and cultural backgrounds and languages that belonged to different language families. The researched places varied from big cities like Izmir in Turkey to very small towns like Birgu in Malta, from towns with very long and rich history like Alcalá de Henares in Spain and Gdańsk in Poland to 'younger' cities like Dobrich in Bulgaria. Our research took place in cities where regional and minority languages are an important means of communication, as well as part of their personal, cultural and social identity like Barcelona, in towns with bilingual communities – Miercurea Ciuc in Romania, as well as in cross-border regions – on the border of Austria and Slovenia.

## Similarity and difference of LL in European cities

As part of our three projects that took place between 2005 and 2014, we came across a variety of cities, LL and cultural identity. We did, however, also noted similarities pertaining to a common European cultural heritage or indeed similarities within geographical or political regions due to history and politics (particularly between east and west or north and south). The history and size of every city played a crucial role in its LL profile.

In smaller towns the LL seemed quite static, while in big cities LL seemed much more dynamic. We repeated the research in 5 of the cities after a period of 3 years. The LL in the Maltese town Birgu (about 3,000 inhabitants) and the Greek town Nafplio (about 13,000 inhabitants) was one and the same even in the small details. For the same period the bigger cities showed significant changes in their urban expression. The LL in Alcalá de Henares, Spain demonstrated evidence of the presence of different languages, used by new immigrant communities there. Everywhere in Dobrich, Bulgaria were introduced public signs in English (together with the Cyrillic signs) and some signs in Romanian could be found as a result of the increased number of visitors from the neighbor country.

Similarities were noted between cities that had recently undergone significant political change (in Poland and Bulgaria), where the LL pictured the political evolution. These cities provided plenty of private signs such as graffiti and art work usually in most cases at places that were symbolic for the previous political regime.

As far as the LL pictures the character of a place and together with the architecture builds the urban image and identity of a place, the southern cities differed from northern cities. Landscapes in Greece, Spain and Malta seemed more traditional, cosy and romantic – street signs with handwriting font, signs with a call to the city visitors.

## LL and language learning

Based on our research in these cities, we prepared materials in 14 languages - short videos and films in the same cities and towns, online games and printed publications (language learning and storytelling books). Generally, our concept focused on the promotion of creativity and respect of cultural and social difference.

By preparing the materials we came up with specific 'chapters' as a guide for the city language:

- *Social relations* used photos of city signs to teach visitors words and phrases around family, names and surnames, greetings, days of the week and times of the year;
- *Signing the way* used photos of city signs to reflect traffic in the city, transport and circulation;
- *Signing the needs* focused on signs around services (banks, post offices, hospitals, etc), shops and restaurants;
- *Signing the places* was about heritage and historic buildings, statues of famous people, museums and art galleries, places of worship, libraries and cultural centres;

- *Signing the atmosphere* was about getting a feeling of the city. Signs ranged from evening festivals to people playing a local instrument or sport, leisure activities and hobbies or anything that was unique about the specific city.

Following this methodology we extracted basic language words and structures and played with them in our products. The projects have generated a great variety of events, products, and original expressions based on visualization of cultural specificities with relation to the linguistic aspects. The variety of forms is not a self-serving aim. It demonstrates that the acquaintance with the city signs vocabulary could be achieved in different ways and that everyone may make their own choice and a few of them may add their own approach. The language/city guides introduced in an amusing way the alphabet, pronunciation, basic vocabulary necessary for elementary communication that could be seen all over the city. The movies introduced naturally the viewer into the cultural and historical landmarks of the cities and acquainted them with the city sign lexis. The computer game was suitable for younger audiences and was an innovative way to present the city signs vocabulary to those who prefer technology to book reading.

## Conclusions

In this paper we argued that there is a clear link between identity theory, linguistic landscape theory and language learning. Our experience both from an academic research perspective and through our involvement with EU project development demonstrates that similarity and diversity in identity building is indeed illustrated in linguistic landscape. Places with strong national identity building illustrate their heritage on their signs, multicultural societies depict their diversity on their signs while places that have gone through political oppression use their LL to present 'their coming out' of the previous authoritative regime. Our next steps for research could focus on comparing the European experience with that of other continents to argue (or not) the existence of a European identity and LL trend.

## References

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