

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Linguistic Landscapes

A Comparative Study of
Urban Multilingualism
in Tokyo



Peter Backhaus

Linguistic Landscapes

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Tokyo, June 2006

Foreword by Bernard Spolsky

Over the past 30 years or so, a number of scholars have been excited to discover or rediscover the riches revealed by a casual or systematic investigation of urban public signs. Somewhat inappropriately labelled ‘linguistic landscape’, there are signs even of a developing sub-field of sociolinguistics or language policy. Essentially, the topic of interest is the choice of language in public signs in urban space (which is why ‘cityscape’ might be a preferable term).

The term ‘linguistic landscape’ appears to have been first used by Landry and Bourhis in a paper they published in 1997 (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) reporting on the perceptions of francophone high school students of the language of public signs in Canadian provinces. It was applied by Ben-Rafael and Shohamy (Ben-Rafael *et al.*, 2001) to describe their counts of signs in various Israeli communities. But, as the excellent review in Chapter 3 of this book shows, the topic has a much longer history. In a study of the spread of English published in 1977, Rosenbaum and his colleagues (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 1977) include counts of the relative numbers of English and Hebrew signs found in a Jerusalem street. My own interest dates from a visit to Jerusalem in 1979: it became a technique for studies of vernacular literacy in various parts of the world, and the basis of a chapter in the description of the languages of the Old City of Jerusalem that Cooper and I published (Spolsky & Cooper, 1983, 1991).

A number of interesting articles and reports of studies are scattered in various journals and collections (including a recent special issue of *The International Journal of Multilingualism*; see Gorter, 2006), but, until now, there has been no serious attempt to define the field and to investigate its problematic methodologies. This is why I find Backhaus’s book so refreshing and significant.

Against the background of a review of earlier work, he tackles the critical methodological issues. Attracted by the seeming objectivity of quantitative studies in the social sciences, it is not unreasonable to want to count signs and classify them by language and function. The first

problem, as Backhaus makes clear, is deciding what counts as a sign. Some are easy: street names (although our own study of the Old City of Jerusalem was held up until we realised that some of the signs were in fact two signs placed one on top of the other), advertising posters and graffiti are commonly framed and so countable – but how do you deal with the multilingualism of some shop signs or the complexity of signs in a shop window? Backhaus considers this problem carefully, and the equally challenging problem of determining where to carry out his investigation. Downtown areas, it seems, can vary in their preferred languages (how else do you recognise Chinatown in an American city?), so that incautious selection of streets to be observed can lead to misleading results. And interpretation of language choices must take into account the state of literacy: only a comparatively small set of India's many languages occur on public signs, and in much of the world, vernacular literacy lags behind standard language literacy. Thus, what is sometimes interpreted as differences in language choice may well be the result of a difference in literacy development.

His own study starts only when he has made decisions on these critical methodological issues. He then provides a detailed case study of Tokyo, a city that the naive foreigner dazzled by the striking (and often electronic) display of three Japanese script types in public signs at first assumes to be as monolingual as the huge crowds that threaten to overwhelm him as he emerges from an underground. It turns out of course that, just as in many other large international cities, public signs reveal a complex but significant pattern of language choice. In Tokyo, Backhaus also reveals the evidence that the language of some signs is 'managed' – the result of explicit decisions of central and local government agencies – rather than the result of choices of the sign owner or maker. In this way, he makes an important step to fit public signs into the study of language management.

This book is not the first study of public signs in urban space, but one of the first to tackle this significant topic with the kind of self-consciousness that promises an advance of understanding of a complex field. It presents a rigorous and cautiously designed empirical study of a single city while raising perceptively the technical and theoretical questions that will need to be resolved to permit safe generalisations. It may well turn out that studying public signs is simply an attractive technique for investigating one aspect of sociolinguistic ecology. Or, with continuing intelligent application and interpretation, it could well develop into a solid theory of the use of language in public visual space. In any case, this volume by Backhaus provides a very necessary basis for future research in the area.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The city is a place of language contact. City walls throughout human history have attracted people of various origins with differing linguistic backgrounds. This applies to ancient capitals like Rome, Athens, or Constantinople just as it holds for post-modern metropolises like New York, London, Paris, or Tokyo. The spatial coexistence of different languages and linguistic varieties has made the city a favourable environment for variationist studies (e.g. Labov, 1972; Milroy, 1980; Trudgill, 1974) and, more recently, multilingualism research (e.g. Extra & Yağmur, 2004; García & Fishman, 1997; Mackey, 2000). The bulk of this research has focused on spoken language, whereas written language has not been given much attention so far. The city, however, is not only ‘a place of talk’, as Halliday (1978: 154) has emphasised. It is a place of writing and reading, too.

This study focuses on urban language contact in the written medium: the languages of the signs. Every urban environment is a myriad of written messages on public display: office and shop signs, billboards and neon advertisements, traffic signs, topographic information and area maps, emergency guidance and political poster campaigns, stone inscriptions, and enigmatic graffiti discourse. These messages bring together a variety of languages and scripts, the total of which constitutes the linguistic landscape of a place. The aim of this book is to provide a first general introduction to the study of language on signs and show what insights about multilingualism and language contact can be gained from this type of research.

The book consists of three shorter and two longer chapters alternating in order. Chapter 2 is a brief theoretical introduction to language on signs. It explores the semiotic properties of this special type of language use distinct from most other forms of written and spoken communication. The visibility and salience of these messages makes up the linguistic landscape, a term that is only gradually gaining currency in multilingualism research. Chapter 2 reviews the common definitions of the term and introduces a terminological distinction between the process and the results of

linguistic landscape actions. It closes with a few comments about the heuristic potential of linguistic landscape research in the study of multilingualism.

Chapter 3 gives an overview of previous approaches to language on signs in various places around the world. The review spans from the pioneer research of the 1960s and 1970s to an accumulation of linguistic landscape approaches since the turn of the century. Included are studies from comparatively monolingual, traditionally bilingual, and highly multilingual environments in North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. In part due to the fact that many of them have been available only in languages other than English, most previous studies do not directly refer to each other. Nevertheless it will be seen that there are many common points, despite differing research environments and research interests.

Chapter 4 establishes the link between the theoretical and the empirical part of this book. It summarises the basic points made in previous research and presents some general conclusions. This is done by introducing an overall framework for the study of the linguistic landscape. The framework is based on three guiding questions that can be found underlying all previous approaches to language on signs. They refer to the sign writers, the sign readers, and the dynamics of the language contact situation as a whole, respectively:

- (1) Linguistic landscaping by whom?
- (2) Linguistic landscaping for whom?
- (3) Linguistic landscape *quo vadis*?

Chapter 4 also touches on some methodological issues of empirical research into language on signs. Discussing the main problems with regard to survey areas, survey items, and linguistic categorisation, it emphasises the importance of a sound methodology of data collection for this type of research.

Chapter 5 applies the framework introduced in Chapter 4 in practice. It works with a sample of 2444 multilingual signs collected in spring 2003 in the centre of Tokyo. The data are discussed on the basis of the following nine analytical categories: languages contained; combination patterns; differences between official and non-official signs; regularities in geographic distribution; availability of translation or transliteration; order of the languages combined; visibility of the multilingual nature of a sign; occurrence of linguistic idiosyncrasies; and coexistence of older and newer versions of a given type of sign.

A closer analysis of the data will bring to light various insights about Tokyo's linguistic landscape and the points referred to in the three guiding questions: the writers of multilingual signs, their readers, and the languages and scripts in contact. They are summarised in Chapter 6, which draws some general conclusions about the city's

linguistic landscape. It emphasises that the study of language on signs is a promising new research field that may provide valuable insights about multilingualism and language contact, both in Tokyo and elsewhere.

Linguistic landscape research is a relatively young sociolinguistic sub-discipline for which few theoretical preliminaries have been developed so far. Since some of the relevant literature was not yet available when I conducted my empirical research in Tokyo, the order of the parts of this book does not completely faithfully represent the order in which these parts have actually been prepared. This becomes most obvious from the fact that some of the surveys discussed as 'previous' approaches in Chapter 3 have actually been published after the 2003 Tokyo survey. Nevertheless, it was considered necessary to include them into this first overview of linguistic landscape research because they are substantial to the development of the discipline worldwide.

Before entering the main part, a few general remarks about terminology and notation should be made. Though the second half of the book focuses on Japan, care has been taken that the discussion remains accessible also without knowledge of Japanese. Technical terms about the Japanese writing system have been kept to a minimum. They are explained at the beginning of section 3.10, which discusses previous linguistic landscape research in Tokyo. A closer account of the Japanese language is given in Shibatani (1990) and Tsujimura (1996). More about the Japanese writing system and its development can be found in Gottlieb (1995), Seeley (1991), Stalph (1996), and Twine (1991).

All translations are attached in square brackets. Japanese terms mentioned in running text are transliterated according to the rules of the Hepburn system (SWET, 1989). They are indicated by italics and – where necessary – attached in their original script in summarising tables. Transliterations cited from signs are not marked by italics but given in quotes. An example is the toponym *shinbashi*, which may be encountered on official signs alternately as 'Shinbashi' or 'Shimbashi'. I follow notational conventions in using slashes to enclose phonemes and in indicating single graphemes by angled brackets. An example is Japanese syllabic /n/, which is represented in the Roman alphabet as <n> but can be altered into <m> when preceding <m>, , or <p>.

Where directly quoting Roman alphabet texts from signs I make no effort to imitate the original design with regard to line make-up, font type, font size, etc. However, I do follow the original in the use and non-use of capital letters.

Chapter 2

Semiotic Background and Terminology

This chapter gives an introduction to the basic characteristics of language use on signs. Exploring the semiotic background to written language in public space, it will be held that language on signs is a specific type of language use distinct from most other forms of written and spoken communication in everyday life. The visibility and salience of language on signs constitutes what has now come to be referred to as the linguistic landscape of a place. The term will be discussed in more detail by reviewing some of its recent definitions. It will be held that the study object of linguistic landscape research should be confined to language on signs, since an expansion to other forms of language use in the public sphere would water down the usefulness of the concept as a whole. In addition, a terminological distinction between linguistic landscape and linguistic landscaping will be made.

2.1 Signs

The noun 'sign', according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, has the following five meanings (Soanes & Stevenson, 2003: 1645):

- 1 an object, quality, or event whose presence indicates the probable presence or occurrence of something else . . .
- 2 a gesture or action used to convey information or instruction . . .
a gesture used in a system of sign language
- 3 a notice on public display that gives information or instruction in a written or symbolic form
- 4 (also zodiacal sign) *Astrology* each of the twelve equal sections into which the zodiac is divided . . .
- 5 *Mathematics* the positiveness or negativeness of a quantity.

Two of these entries, 1 and 3, are of importance to the present study. First of all, it is common knowledge that 'sign' is a key term in semiotics. The semiotic sign comprises any meaningful unit interpreted as standing for something other than itself. This type of meaning is included

in entry 1. Signs usually take a physical form, such as sounds, images, acts, etc. From a semiotic point of view, the world we live in is a world of signs. Anything we understand about ourselves and what is happening around us is based on emitting and interpreting signs. Communication in whatever way without them would be inconceivable.

Best known in semiotic theory are two conceptions of the sign. One is based on the theoretical framework of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913); the other follows the US American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914). According to Saussurean semiology, the basic characteristic of the sign is a bilateral relationship between a ‘signifier’ as its material form, and a ‘signified’ as its conceptual content (Saussure, 1916: 65–70). Most adherents of Peirce, who has assumed a triadic interaction between a signifying ‘representamen’, a conceptual ‘interpretant’, and a designated ‘object’, emphasise the interpretation process and the role of an interpreting entity (hearer, reader, etc.) in making sense of a given sign. This ‘pragmatic’ dimension of the sign is not captured by Saussure’s dyadic conception (Chandler, 2002: 32–6).

A second meaning of the term ‘sign’ relevant to this study is referred to in entry 3 of the above quotation: that of an inscribed surface displayed in public space in order to convey a message of wider concern to a non-specified group of readers. This type of sign is used in order to disseminate messages of general public interest, such as topographic information, directions, warnings, etc. Public signs also appear in commercial contexts like marketing and advertising, where their function is to draw attention to a business or product. There is no clear-cut distinction between commercial and non-commercial signs though, because the former can provide information of general interest, too. The semantic differences between the two types of signs given in entries 1 and 3 are fundamental enough to allow for a clear understanding about which one is referred to from context. Where it is necessary to explicitly distinguish between the two, I will use the term ‘semiotic sign’ as opposed to ‘public sign’.

Public signs are a specific type of semiotic sign in that they too stand for something other than themselves. Take as an example the name of a company attached to the front of a building. The sign on which the name is inscribed indicates that the premises of the company are situated in this building. The sign represents the company as a whole. The meaning to be conferred – ‘This is the building of company X’ – arises out of the combination of the sign with its referent, the building to which it is attached. In this sense, a public sign is in itself a signifier that relates to a specific signified, such as a company, a product, a place, a rule, or some other concept. A sign need not necessarily be attached to its referent though. Instead, it can give a direction how to get there, as in the case of guidance signs, or simply call attention to it, as advertisement signs do.

From a semiotic point of view, a public sign makes sense only in combination with its referent. The sign of company X does not fulfil its designating function properly on the sign writer's desk or when attached to the building of company Y. It has to be put up at the right point in time and space. This applies not only to signs designating material objects, but to all other types of public messages, too. Joseph *et al.* give the following example:

A flat metal disc of characteristic size and design bearing certain Arabic numerals and attached to a pole planted by the roadside may be called a speed-limit sign. And in this usage it may count as a 'sign' from the moment of manufacture until long after it has been uprooted and consigned to a rubbish tip. But this usage is of no interest to the semiologist, who is concerned with the object only in so far as it functions semiotically, *as* a sign. And it can function as a sign only when *in situ*, i.e. when located in the appropriate topographical context. (2001: 209, emphasis original)

Following Peircean theory, the authors also underline the necessity of an interpreting entity. Unless interpreted by someone, human being or other, a public sign has no meaning (see Keller (1995: 119) for a counter-perspective). As Joseph *et al.* further explain:

Even when located in an appropriate environment, an object functions semiotically only in so far as someone makes it do so. The signhood of the speed-limit sign is not immanent in it. However impeccably positioned, it is not a sign when nobody is around to see it, for instance. Or when seen by strangers to our civilization who have no idea what to make of it. Signhood is conferred on a sign – on what thereby becomes a sign – if and when human beings (or semiotically competent creatures) attach a signification to it that goes beyond its intrinsic physical properties, whether in furtherance of a particular programme of activities, or to link different aspects or phases of their activities, to enrich their understanding of their local circumstances or general situation. (2001: 210, emphasis original)

More parallels between semiotic and public signs can be identified when taking a closer look at the different ways in which a sign makes sense. Following Peirce, it is generally held that a sign can function semiotically in basically three ways: as an index, as an icon, or as a symbol. An index is considered the most archaic type of sign. It is a sign with a signifier directly connected or pointing to its signified. There is a factual relationship between signifier and signified, which can be immediately observed or inferred. Commonly quoted examples are natural signs such as smoke indicating fire, medical symptoms indicating physical disease, or signals such as a knock on a door or the ringing of a phone.

A second possible way by which a relationship between signifier and signified can be established is through iconicity. In such a case the signifier is linked to its object of reference by virtue of resemblance or likeness. Examples are portraits, diagrams, or imitative gestures. The third type of sign is the symbol, for which the link between signifier and signified is arbitrary. It is based on neither similarity nor factual closeness but purely determined by convention. The most comprehensive symbolic sign system is language, which mainly functions by virtue of conventional speech signs. The three types of signs – index, icon, and symbol – are not mutually exclusive, but the relationship between the signifier and the signified of a sign can be based on more than one property (Chandler, 2002: 36–42).

Index, icon, and symbol are concepts applicable to different ways of information provision on public signs. Characteristic features of indexicality are arrows and other pointing elements used to show a direction in which the indicated object is to be found. These signs function by virtue of contiguity between signifier and signified. Use of iconic elements is a frequent strategy on public signs, too. They appear in the form of pictograms – standardised pictorial marks containing messages of an informative or directive nature without relying on a specific language (Kjørup, 2004). Another frequent example of iconic elements on public signs is maps, which provide geographic information through a complex graphic replication of the surrounding area. Symbolic elements on public signs refer to all forms of information provision by means of written language, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Indexicality is often understood as the general context-dependency of all types of signs, including public signs. As Scollon and Scollon hold:

All signs, whether they are icons or symbols are also indexes. That is because all signs must be located in the material world to exist. Information and knowledge must be represented by a system of signs – icons, symbols, and indexes; information and knowledge cannot have independent existence. The familiar stop sign on the street corner is a symbol in several ways: The letters ‘S’, ‘T’, ‘O’, and ‘P’ symbolize the English word ‘stop’ which itself symbolizes the meaning ‘to progress no further’. It also symbolizes this meaning through the conventional use of a red color on a hexagonal background. Until it is placed in the world, this sign only means to stop in the abstract. On the sign painter’s bench it does not mean that he should stop painting. It only means that a car should stop when it is placed physically in the world at a place such as a street intersection. This shift from abstract meaning potential to actual, real-world meaning is the property of indexicality. The sign abstractly symbolizes ‘to stop’, but indexes where and how and who in what

container is to stop in the real world only when it is grounded in the material world of cement roadways, curbs, and metal poles. (2003: vii–viii; see also 3.7)

According to Scollon and Scollon, the necessity of a public sign to be set up in its appropriate place in the material world in order to function properly is a problem of indexicality. With regard to the distinction between index, icon, and symbol, two levels need to be kept apart. One is the semiotic mode chosen to convey a message, for instance by means of written language (symbolic), pictograms (iconic), or arrows (indexical). On a higher level, each message to be conveyed is context-dependent and directly related to the spatial circumstances of its use. In this sense, indexicality is a property of all signs.

2.2 Language on Signs

Language is a symbolic sign system in which conventional speech signs (morphemes, words, sentences, etc.) represent meanings. Used on public signs, language comes in its written form. This way of representation differs from spoken language in various respects. In using visual rather than acoustic speech signs, writing escapes the evanescence of the spoken word. Written language is permanent. It is not bound to the immediate time of utterance but can exist independently of it (Coulmas, 2003: 11; Günther & Pompino-Marschall, 1996: 907). Being dissolvable from the circumstances of its production, written language lends itself far more easily than spoken language to transmitting information to an unspecified group of people in public space.

In a typology suggested by Wienold (1994) language use on signs is characterised as part of one distinguishable type of language use in everyday life. Referred to by Wienold as ‘inscriptions’, this type is defined as:

written uses of language which do not have a recognizable emitter and are not meant for special receivers. They can be read/received by anyone coming into appropriate distance. They do not arise out of or establish or promote personal relationships and are not interpreted that way (as conversation is). (1994: 640)

Wienold (1994, 1995) includes in this type of language use instances of inscriptions that would not normally be regarded as public signs in the sense defined above, for instance language on clothes, electric appliances, and other everyday commodities. Nevertheless his suggested definition captures the basic characteristics of language on signs, which are lack of a recognisable emitter and lack of a specified target group. Even if a sign does contain information about its originator, this originator is

usually an indistinct larger entity – a private or official organisation – rather than an individual person (see also Harweg, 1979: 10). The sign reader has no immediate means of responding to the transmitted message because the originator of the message is absent. The latter, on the other hand, has to be aware of the fact that they deal with a completely unknown readership. Access to a sign is free to everyone in sight. It cannot be restricted by the issuing authority in any reasonable way.

These are properties that distinguish language on signs from virtually all forms of spoken language, an exception being pre-recorded announcements at public facilities such as stations and airports, which share many of the characteristics of inscriptions (Wienold, 1994: 647). Due to its indexical qualities, language on signs also differs from various other forms of written language use. Personal letters, diaries, books, or newspapers do not require to be read at a certain point in space in order to make sense. Functioning independently of their emplacement, they are clearly distinct from language used on signs. This is of relevance with regard to the definition of the term 'linguistic landscape', to which we will turn next.

2.3 The Linguistic Landscape

According to the commonly quoted definition by Landry and Bourhis (1997: 23) the linguistic landscape refers to 'the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region'. More precisely:

The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 25)

Landry and Bourhis's definition makes it clear that the study object of linguistic landscape research is language on signs in public space. This point has been re-emphasised in a current state-of-the-art paper by Gorter (2006: 2), who holds that linguistic landscape research is concerned with 'the use of language in its written form in the public sphere'. Likewise, Ben-Rafael *et al.* (2006: 14) define the linguistic landscape as referring to 'any sign or announcement located outside or inside a public institution or a private business in a given geographical location.'

Another terminological suggestion has recently been made by Itagi and Singh in their introductory chapter to a publication about the linguistic landscape of India (Itagi & Singh, 2002a). They paraphrase the terms 'Linguistic Landscape/Landscaping (LL)' as 'language use in its written