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The Linguistic Landscape in Multilingual Urban Settings: An Introduction

Abstract

This article provides a concise introduction to the concept of the “linguistic landscape” along with a description of its main features and of its research implications. The concept was introduced by Landry and Bourhis. They define the “linguistic landscape” as the collection of visual material in different languages in a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. These written signs could be public (or *top-down*) signs, such as street names and road signs, and/or private (or *bottom-up*) signs, such as advertisements on billboards, shop signs, and so forth. In particular, this concept has become a useful tool for sociolinguistic research on multilingualism in urban settings. Today, in fact, due to recent extensive migration, many different languages from various parts of the world tend to coexist in cities. This article focuses on the sociolinguistic research carried out by the *Università per Stranieri di Siena* into the linguistic landscape of the Esquilino area in Rome in 2004 and 2005. For this research a valuable multimethodological approach was used, leading to particularly interesting results. One of these results concerns the fact that the presence of some foreign languages in the area, such as Chinese, is not directly linked to the number of foreign speakers, but to sociological issues like the kind of job foreigners have and their degree of participation in community and institutional life.

Sommaire

Le but de cet article est d'introduire l'idée de “paysage linguistique” à travers la description de ses points les plus saillants ainsi que les aspects les plus importants relatifs à la recherche. L'idée de “paysage linguistique” a été introduite par Landry et Bourhis. D'après les auteurs le “paysage linguistique” est constitué par toute forme d'écriture visible que l'on peut déceler dans un certain territoire, ou bien région ou agglomération urbaine. Ces écritures peuvent être aussi bien publiques (ou *top-down*) comme, par exemple, la toponymie routière et les panneaux routiers que des enseignes privées (ou *bottom-up*), comme les affiches/panneaux publicitaires, les enseignes des boutiques, etc. L'étude du ‘paysage linguistique’ est un instrument important pour la recherche sociolinguistique dans le domaine de la pluralité des langues dans les réalités urbaines. De nos jours, en effet, à cause d'intenses phénomènes d'immigration, plusieurs langues, provenant de différentes parties du monde, coexistent dans les villes. Dans cet article nous allons présenter, en particulier, la recherche menée par l'*Università per Stranieri di Siena* en 2004 et en 2005 sur le paysage linguistique du quartier de Rome “Esquilino”. Cette recherche se caractérise par une approche multiméthodologique qui a menée à des résultats importants et exhaustifs concernant la présence du multilinguisme dans le quartier pris en question. Un de ces résultats est que la présence de quelques langues étrangères dans la zone, comme le chinois, n'est pas directement liée au nombre des locuteurs, mais à des aspects sociologiques comme le type de travail des étrangers et leur degré de participation dans la communauté et la vie institutionnelle.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel bietet eine knappe Einführung in das Konzept der “sprachlichen Landschaft” zusammen mit einer Beschreibung seiner Hauptmerkmale und deren Implikationen für die Forschung. Das Konzept wurde von Landry und Bourhis eingeführt. Sie definieren “sprachliche Landschaft” als Sammlung visuellen Materials in verschiedenen Sprachen innerhalb eines Territoriums, einer Region oder einer urbanen Agglomeration. Diese geschriebenen Schilder können öffentliche (oder *top-down*) Schilder sein, wie Straßennamen und Verkehrsschilder, und/oder private (oder *bottom-up*) Schilder, wie Werbung, Ladenschilder und so weiter. Dieses Konzept ist insbesondere für soziolinguistische Forschung ein nützliches Werkzeug geworden. In der Tat gibt es aufgrund der jüngsten extensiven Migration eine Tendenz, dass viele verschiedene Sprachen aus vielen Teilen der Welt in Städten nebeneinander existieren. Dieser Artikel konzentriert sich auf soziolinguistische Forschung, die von der *Università per Stranieri di Siena* zur sprachlichen Landschaft des Esquilino-Gebietes in Rom 2004 und 2005 durchgeführt worden ist. Für diese Forschung wurden ein multimethodischer Zugang gewählt, der zu besonders interessanten Ergebnissen geführt hat. Eines der Ergebnisse ist, dass einige Fremdsprachen im Gebiet, etwa das Chinesische, nicht direkt an die Zahl der Nicht-Muttersprachler geknüpft, sondern an soziologische Aspekte wie Beruf der Ausländer und deren Teilnahme am gemeinschaftlichen und institutionellen Leben.

The aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of the linguistic landscape in contemporary multilingual urban settings. Particular reference will be made to a recent research project into multilingualism in Rome carried out by the *Università per Stranieri di Siena*, which represents a valuable contribution to the field, especially from a methodological perspective. At the outset, it is worth mentioning that cities today are at the center of a wide debate across a broad range of disciplines. As far as social and human sciences are concerned, these disciplines range from anthropology to sociology, and from architecture to urban studies, including geography, philosophy, and literary, artistic and linguistic studies. Following recent extensive immigration into many big cities in Europe, much linguistic research into urban settings has contributed towards a greater understanding of the impact that foreign languages have on local and other immigrant languages. Primarily because of the presence of numerous foreign languages in cities today, “the city can be viewed today as a plurilingual reality, which contributes at the same time to language unification and standardization, to language contact and conflict, to linguistic hybridization and creolization” (Tani 2008: 71; Calvet 1994). It should be observed that this language hybridization and communication in different languages does not necessarily entail a deterioration or impoverishment of local or native languages, but can be viewed as an enriching cultural and linguistic contribution. Italy, in particular, has recently been at the center of large waves of immigration and, as a result, many foreign and for the most part non-European languages now coexist alongside Standard Italian and Italian dialects.

The recent multilingual phenomenon arising from the presence of non-European cultures and languages in Italy, and particularly in Rome, could in fact represent an opportunity to develop a new awareness and a spirit of enquiry on the part of everyone, scholars and laymen alike. One only needs to take a walk in the Esquilino, the Roman neighborhood with the highest rate of immigrants, to hear conversations in Chinese, Bengali, and Hindi, not to mention some of the languages that are more established in this area (Bagna and Barni 2006; Gorter 2010). Moreover, apart from foreign languages, new forms of urban aggregates are emerging which are no longer either connected or dependent on the historic city center. Instead, they tend to be oriented towards a polycentric urban life, to the extent that the distinction between city center and suburb seems to become blurred. As observed by Ilaria Tani while commenting on two definitions of Piazza Vittorio (the main square in the Esquilino area) by Vando (2007): “Piazza Vittorio has been defined as ‘the center of the suburbs’ for the immigrants and as ‘the suburb of the city center’ for the Romans” (Tani 2008: 71).

In addition to the plurilingual “voices”, the Roman neighborhood of Esquilino displays many written messages in “exotic” foreign languages. These include shop signs, signs in shop windows, posters, classifieds and advertisements. Moreover, many messages display “exotic” scripts such as Chinese, Tagalog, Hindi and Urdu. Even at the visual level, then, foreign languages capture our attention and form what we can consider the “linguistic landscape”. The most quoted definition used by scholars is the one provided by Landry and Bourhis in their well-known essay “Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality: An Empirical Study” (1997: 25):

“The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on governmental buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. The linguistic landscape of a territory can serve two basic functions: an informational function and a symbolic function.”

It is clear from the above passage that the concept of the linguistic landscape is necessarily connected to the notion of space, to what is visible in it and how foreign languages are represented in it. Moreover, the notion of space itself could be conceived in two distinct ways. As Gorter writes (2006: 82), the word *landscape* “refers to a piece of scenery itself, as well as to the representation of the landscape. [...] The language signs in the cities can be taken as the literal panorama a spectator

will see when walking the streets, but that same view reflects somehow the language composition of the inhabitants (and probably visitors) of the city.” The term *landscape* then refers both to the actual appearance of a place and to its representation, and the concept of “linguistic landscape” somehow reflects this double meaning: the actual shop signs, billboards or posters that initially capture our attention at the same time represent the languages in which they are written.

The informational function of the linguistic landscape consists in its possibility to inform us about the geographical delimitation of a territory inhabited by a given linguistic community (Landry/Bourhis 1997: 25) and, as such, provides information on this community. Above all, in the case of bilingual and multilingual communities, the languages used on the shop signs may indicate differences in language usage, especially if the language of the signs differs from that used in the neighborhood, thus providing information on the actual use of languages in a given territory.

Another important distinction underlined by Landry and Bourhis is the one concerning the difference between private signs, known as *bottom-up* (Gorter 2010) or *in vivo* (Backhaus 2006; Calvet 1990), and official signs, known as *top-down* (Gorter 2010) or *in vitro* (Backhaus 2006; Calvet 1990). Private signs typically pertain to shops and private businesses, advertisements and even graffiti, whereas public signs, usually put up by local authorities, consist of traffic signs, street names, names of sites, buildings and their uses, ministries, schools, parks, and public transportation. (Landry/Bourhis 1997: 26). Private signs are more commonly multilingual as they do not share the bureaucratic functions of public signs, which tend to be in the official language(s) of the country rather than in the immigrant languages; thus, sociolinguistic research on multilingualism is bound to find more relevant data in private signs. Such research can provide reliable information on the cultural and linguistic diversity of a given area.

An important aspect concerning the presence of languages in a given territory lies in its symbolic as well as in its informational function. If a given ethnic group’s language is largely present in the linguistic landscape, then this group acquires prestige and a positive identity when compared with other ethnic groups. This aspect is connected to the concept of objective and subjective “ethnolinguistic vitality” by which “the prevalence of the in-group language on public signs can symbolize the strength or vitality on one’s own language group on the demographic and institutional control front relative to other language communities within the intergroup setting” (Landry/Bourhis 1997: 28). However, “exclusion of the in-group language from public signs can convey a message to the effect that one’s own language is not valued and has little status within society. Furthermore, such exclusion conveys the notion that the in-group language is of little use for conducting public affairs, thus reinforcing a diglossic situation to the advantage of the dominant language” (Landry/Bourhis 1997: 28). Such a situation might induce those disadvantaged ethnic groups to restrict the use of their own language to limited situations, resulting in a negative psychological perception of their own identity. Among the various languages that can be found in the linguistic landscape of most cities in the world, English maintains a presence mainly by virtue of its role as *lingua franca* and because it holds both an informational function and a symbolic one. As far as the informational, or communicational, function is concerned, English is especially useful for foreign tourists and immigrants. Its symbolic function has been largely acknowledged by various authors, due to its widespread presence on shop signs, billboards and advertisements in most big and medium-size cities around the world (Piller 2003; Kelly-Holmes 2005).

Research projects on the linguistic landscapes of various cities and territories had already been carried out several years before the now widely-accepted definition of the linguistic landscape by Landry and Bourhis in 1997 (Mac Giolla Christ 2007; Shohamy/Gorter 2009; Jaworski/Thurlow 2010). Cities, given their high concentration of language uses by speakers belonging to different

social classes, have been a preferred research setting for many linguists and sociolinguists. Labov (1966), in particular, studied language variation in the urban context. Apart from speech, attention has been given to written displays in the city (Petrucci 1986), from the epigraphs and graffiti (Zennaro 2004), to billboards, advertisements and fliers. Markus (2002) chose instead to focus on the distribution and function of buildings within the city. Among the studies that mainly dealt with the linguistic landscape, particular mention should be made of the research by Rosenbaum et al. (1997), which analyzed private and public signs in Jerusalem (Backhaus 2006). Backhaus underlines that such studies are usually carried out in countries where there is evidence of a language problem or conflict. In this sense, Backhaus mentions research carried out in Brussels (Tulp 1978; Wenzel 1996), in Montreal (Monnier 1989), in Jerusalem (Spolsky/Cooper, 1991), and a study comparing shop signs in Paris and Dakar (Calvet 1990, 1994).

It should be pointed out, however, that it was mainly after the definition of the concept by Landry and Bourhis that most research on the linguistic landscape took place both in Europe and in the rest of the world. In line with the definition of linguistic landscapes, such research dealt with the visibility of languages in urban public spaces, excluding other uses of language, which did not include written signs (Tani 2008). Moreover, Backhaus (2006) mentions the various studies that have been carried out in recent years and, among these, he mentions a study on the linguistic landscape in India (Itagi and Singh, 2002; LaDousa, 2002), and those on various cities in Israel (Ben Rafael et al., 2006, also quoted in Gorter, 2006). In the study by Reh (2004) particular attention was given to the plurilingual population of Lira, in Uganda, whereas multilingual signs in the immigrant neighborhoods of Ghent have been studied by Collins and Slembrouck and, finally, Born (2004) analyzed the Italian and German signs in two cities in South Brazil.

As one can easily imagine, the presence of English in urban language landscapes constitutes a seminal and a distinct line of research. It is worth mentioning, among others, the study carried out by Griffin (2004) on the use of English in shop signs in Rome, and the two studies on the use of English in shop signs in various European cities by Maria Schlick (2002, 2003). There is also the research on shop signs in Tokyo (MacGregor 2003) and the frequently-quoted study on the presence of English in Milan by Ross (1997), in which the definition ‘International English’ is employed to stress the high degree of intelligibility of signs in English. The study by McArthur (2000) on written signs in Zurich and Uppsala considered both English and multilingualism. While he agrees with Ross’s suggestion that English is a constant presence in the urban linguistic landscape, his findings proved that, besides English, other languages are also widely employed through the use of terms which are easily understandable on an international level. McArthur calls such uses *Interanto*, a blended term which includes the words *international* and *Esperanto* to emphasize the tendency toward language mixing and intelligibility. Apart from these studies, which primarily focused on English, it should be underlined that the presence of English has been discussed in most studies on the urban linguistic landscape. English is present to different degrees and for different uses, confirming its fundamental role as a *lingua franca* worldwide.

Research methodology is a crucial question when it comes to analyzing the linguistic landscape of a given city or territory. Many enquiries have employed a merely visual or mapping method which “reduces the city, also from a linguistic point of view, to a bi-dimensional surface based on points, lines and polygons which do not provide the full complex picture of the socio-linguistic interactions nor the mutual attitudes existing among the various groups of speakers” (Bagna/Barni 2006: 8). What is needed is a multimethodological research approach, such as the one employed by the *Università per Stranieri di Siena* for its *Osservatorio Linguistico permanente dell’italiano diffuso tra stranieri e delle lingue immigrate in Italia* (Permanent Research Centre for the Study of the Italian Used by Non-Native Speakers and for the Study of Immigrant Languages in Italy). The

group adopted a multimethodological approach for a significant quantitative and qualitative research project in the Esquilino area of Rome between 2004 and 2005. The visual approach was supported by the use of technology, such as digital cameras connected to handheld computers, making it possible to record languages spoken in the neighborhood.

The research method took a sample of streets in the Esquilino area (e.g. via Giolitti, viale Manzoni and via Cavour) and recorded the languages written on the text formats referred to above. The texts were shop signs, brochures, posters, billboards, advertisements, personal messages, classifieds, and menus: in brief, all the written material that could possibly be seen. The next step after data collection entailed a classification of all the material under the following headings: languages used, lexical units, text genres, localization, domain and context of use. By employing such classification it was possible to create maps and map representations that could provide information on three basic dimensions. The first dimension, also defined as ‘static’, indicated the presence and visibility of languages in their written forms. The second dimension marked the interactions among the various foreign groups and to what extent they used their native languages to communicate with other people. To this end, interactions were recorded and categorized according to the kind of exchange and whether the conversations were monolingual or multilingual. Lastly, the third dimension involved the recording of conversations occurring among different groups and the use of “aggregate” languages. In this last case, the recorded conversations occurred in a specific place, such as the market or the local school, and the researchers tried to answer the following questions: “Is there a difference in the linguistic behavior if the shop keeper at the market is an Italian or a foreigner? Is there a difference in the linguistic behavior if the customer is an Italian or a foreigner? And which language is used if the foreign customer speaks the same language as the shop keeper or a different language?” (Bagna/Barni 2006). This data was categorized and represented on a map using polygons.

As a whole, the aim of this complex data gathering and analysis is to provide important information about the presence and use of languages in the neighborhood. The researchers first record the languages in their written forms, then the interactions among speakers, and finally the interactions are classified and analyzed according to the specific situations of the verbal exchanges. This methodology has led to interesting results. For instance, it has been possible to ascertain that 24 languages are used in the Esquilino area. The languages that are most common in the area are Chinese, Bengali, and—of course—Italian and English. Other commonly found languages are Sinhalese, Hindi, Russian, Arabic, Romanian, but also Spanish, French, Punjabi, Korean and Japanese. There are fewer instances of Albanian, Tagalog and Turkish, while there were very few instances (sometimes just one) of Urdu, Farsi, Portuguese, Polish and Ukrainian (Bagna/Barni 2006; Tani 2008). Thus, not all the languages found in the area are equally used or represented, as in many cases demographic data on an ethnic group does not reflect the use of that group’s language. Let us consider an example: even though there are many Filipino immigrants in Rome – they are the second largest group –, Tagalog, their native language, has nonetheless very little visibility on the linguistic landscape. A reason for this lies in the fact that many Filipinos work as caretakers for Roman families, thus they are physically and culturally less present in the Esquilino area and only a few of them manage a shop or other commercial activity. Quite surprisingly, even though there are fewer Chinese than Filipino people in Rome, most Chinese work in the commercial sector and, as a consequence, the presence of Chinese in the linguistic landscape of the Esquilino is prominent; it is, in fact, the most visible language when compared to the other foreign languages. As a result, data on the vitality of foreign languages is not directly proportional to the number of speakers of that language, but it is related to sociological questions such as the kind of job immigrants have in a given area and also to their degree of participation in its institutional life through political activity, or participation in school, cultural or media events.

We can conclude by observing that, besides the traditional, historical, natural, and geographical landscape, we also need to consider, in an age of great migratory upheaval, the linguistic landscape. This should be viewed analytically and critically as the outcome of oral communication and of written messages, which testify to the presence of individuals from different countries, and which are not merely pictorially interesting, but also particularly significant from a cultural perspective. In this sense, the linguistic landscape represents both a novelty in the contemporary world and also a genuine and worthwhile challenge for sociolinguistics.

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