

The Linguistic Landscape: What We Can Learn From It

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Abstract. In the course of the last two decades, the linguistic landscape, that is, the display of written language in public places, has become an object of investigation, which is now recognised as a branch of Sociolinguistics. This is remarkable because since its inception, Sociolinguistics, much like structural linguistics, has always had an oral bias and paid relatively little attention to writing, which was often seen as a mere representation of speech. In fact, written language is a branch of human communication with great social significance. In this lecture, I will show that linguistic landscaping is a political issue with many economic and cultural aspects, which upon inspection reveal much about how a society is constituted. At the same time, the linguistic landscape is a repository of history that is often contested. Using examples from various contexts in Asia and Europe, I will show how and why language displayed in public texts may become and often is subject to legal restrictions designed to proscribe or, in the contrary, promote the visibility of languages in the public domain. Language, in writing as well as in speech, is always embedded in social practice. This is only pointing out the obvious. However, I will try to show that the linguistic landscape also makes for a good starting point with regard to foreign language education.

1. Introduction

Once we have opened our eyes to it, the linguistic landscape (LL) presents itself in such a variety that every student of it must grapple with the question of how best to conceptualize and order it and how to assign it a position in our understanding of language and society. In the initial phase when Sociolinguistics gained recognition as a proper field of study, research was mainly oriented to spoken language and the many varieties which earlier investigations of (normative) grammar had largely ignored. About the relationship between language and society, written language has, however, as much to say as speech. Since early studies near the end of the last century, for instance by Landry and Bourhis, who defined the linguistic landscape as “the visibility and

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salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (1997: 23), the field has expanded steadily. My view is that the field is still evolving with new definitions being proposed, as new research projects are undertaken.

Rather than introduce yet another definition, I want to start here by walking you through a series of examples that may give you a *tour d'horizon* of the field. It is by no means representative, let alone complete, but may illustrate the multifariousness of life with the written word in the public sphere.

Linguistic landscape is a way of looking at things or, if you like, a lens through which to see writing, and this lens reveals many different facets. For instance, aesthetic: is it beautiful or ugly? Linguistic: are words and grammar used correctly? Are there many mistakes? Geolinguistic: is the LL what you would expect of the region/country where you are? Sociolinguistic: What languages and varieties are being used? Political: Do messages on display carry political contents? Is the script ideologically loaded? Economic: Who pays for, and who benefits of, inscriptions on public signs? Historical: Since when have signs been where they are now and why? And so on. Many other questions could be asked. But let's get a bit more specific.

2. A Guided Tour Through the LL

My proposal is to consider LL research as a branch of Sociolinguistics while drawing on other theories wherever that is useful.

Linguistic landscapes are part of a visibility regime. The eight *wh*-questions—*who*, *where*, *when*, *what*, *which* language(s), to *whom*, *why*, with *whose* permission—are a first step toward a systematic analysis of such a regime.

LLs consist of linguistic expressions of various kinds exhibited in public spaces that are initially partitioned spontaneously. With growing complexity of urban environments legal regulations evolve that maintain divisions and monitor them more or less strictly. Where norms and regulations are established *visibility regimes* come into existence. Important as they are, *LLs are only one part of visibility regimes*. The display of religious symbols, flags, dress codes (veil in public), seating arrangements (at school, in parliament), art styles, architecture, license plates, among others are also included. Considering all of them, it is important to pay attention to the *boundaries between the visible and the invisible* by means of which social figurations manifest themselves as a visual order. To put it differently, LLs are part of a visibility regime that reflects government regimes. What is visible and what invisible may be an aesthetic question, but in many cases it is politically loaded.

The boundaries between the visible and the invisible are social facts. In relation to LL they refer, for instance, to language status, that is, national, official, minority, or foreign. Are there any restrictions on displaying a language in public? Do such restrictions become apparent upon comparing a particular LL now with the same LL two, three, four decades ago?

We can look at the boundaries between the visible and the invisible of a LL from the point of view of *appearance discrimination*, e.g., the teaching of Chinese languages in schools and Chinese on public signage was banned in Indonesia from 1966 to 1998.

Under dictator Francisco Franco (1939-1975) the Catalan language was banned from public spaces, even from gravestones, in Spain where Spanish was made the sole language of public life.

Bilingual street signs vandalized in many places, Ulster, Carinthia, Austria.

Foreign language street signs as *tokens of recognition*, e.g., Japanese, Arabic in Düsseldorf; metro station signs in 4 languages in Tokyo.

Hierarchies in bi-/multilingual street signs, e.g., in Quebec: “The Office Québécois de la langue française considers any message displayed in a place accessible to the general public as “public signage”.”

The general rule is that public signage and commercial advertising in Québec must be in French. Another language may also be used alongside French, provided that French is ‘markedly predominant’.¹

Making (in)visible is a way of exercising power.

As a theoretical embedding I will use 8 Wh-questions, as guideline as follows:

1. *Who* writes
2. *Where*
3. *When*
4. *What*
5. Using *which* language(s)
6. addressing *Whom*
7. *Why*, to what end
8. with *Whose* permission.

3. Examples

With these questions in mind, let us go through a round of linguistic landscape clippings.

1. L’affichage public et la publicité commerciale doivent se faire en français. Ils peuvent également être faits à la fois en français et dans une autre langue pourvu que le français y figure de façon nettement prédominante. Charte de la langue française. <https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/fr/document/lc/C-11>

3.1. Kanji of the year 2022



Who: Kiyonori Mori, the head priest of Kiyomizu Temple, who also served as a director of the Japan Kanji Proficiency Test Association. *Where:* Kiyomizu-dera, Kyoto. *When:* 12/2022. *What:* the Chinese character of the year: 戦 *sen, ikusa* which means war, battle. In *which* language: Japanese/Chinese. To *whom:* the general public. *Why:* ???

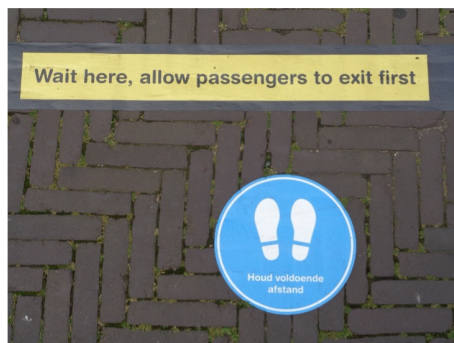
With *Whose* permission: Kiyomizu Tempel and Japan Kanji Proficiency Test Association.

3.2. Covid-19 The Hague



Who: private person. *Where:* Amsterdam. *When:* 12/2022. *What:* Covid-19. *Which* language: indefinite. To *Whom:* everyone. *Why:* ??? *Whose* permission: without.

3.3. Covid, passengers



Who: city administration. *Where:* The Hague. *When:* 2022. *What:* instruction to guide behaviour. *Which language:* English, Dutch. To *Whom:* passengers *Why:* health protection. *Whose permission:* ???

3.4. Covid African Artists, De Fred



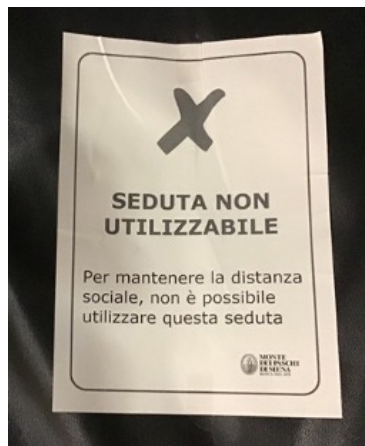
Who: African artists. *Where:* Berlin, Cyber space. *When:* 2022. *What:* publicity. *What language:* English. To *whom:* public. To *what end:* ??? *Whose permission:* ???

3.5. The Hague



Who: Neighbourhood. *Where:* The Hague. *When:* 2022. *What:* safety instruction. *Which language:* Dutch. *To whom:* public. *Why:* fight pandemic. *Whose permission:* Neighbourhood association.

3.6. Distanza sociale—new expressions



To maintain social distance
this seat cannot be used.



Wait here. Observe
the safety distance.

Who: A bank, a shop. *Where:* Tuscany. *When:* 06/2022. *What:* health safety. *Which language:* Italian. *To whom:* customers. *Why:* to fight Covid. *Whose permission:* Bank, shop owner.

3.7. Quarantine, St. Luke's



Who: St. Luke's Hospital. *Where:* Tokyo. *What:* Encouragement. *Which language:* English, Japanese. *To whom:* staff, patients. *Why:* to boost morale. *Whose permission:* Hospital.

3.8. How to confront the pandemic in Tokyo

English first, Japanese second?



Who: Ministry of Health. *Where:* Tokyo airport. *When:* 2023. *What:* instruction. *Which language:* Japanese, English, Chinese, Korean. *To whom:* passengers. *To what end:* Instruction. *Whose permission:* Japanese government.

3.9. Non siamo pacchi

Demonstration in Venice features trade union's demands, which throws some light on freedom of expression in Italy.



Who: kindergarten teachers. *Where:* Venice. *When:* 2020. *What:* protest. *Which language:* Italian. *To whom:* government. *Why:* to get a raise. *Whose permission:* ???

3.10. Twelve socialist core values

How the public sphere is governed, in China compared to other countries. From left to right: Prosperity/Democracy, Civility/Harmony, Freedom/Equality, Justice/Rule of law, Patriotism/Dedication, (not visible:) Integrity/Friendship.



Who: Tongji University. *Where:* Shanghai. *When:* 11/2019. *What:* Socialist values. *What language:* Chinese. *To whom:* Students *Why:* political education. *Whose permission:* State.

3.11. Street sign in Jerusalem



Who: Municipal administration. *Where:* Jerusalem. *When:* 10/2022. *What:* Street sign. *Which languages:* Hebrew, Arabic, English. *To whom:* public. *Why:* to represent all population groups. *Whose permission:* the city's.

3.12. City of tolerance, Lisbon



Who: City of Lisbon. *Where:* Portugal. *When:* 2016. *What:* public commitment. *Which language(s):* many. *To whom:* citizens and foreigners. *Why:* to promote tolerance symbolized by multilingualism.² *Whose permission:* the city's.

2. *Editor's note:* Notice that while Portuguese and Italian use classical 19th-century-like type, Greek and Hebrew are set in Helvetica, and Arabic in Geezah, a modern computer-like typeface. All languages are equal, but some share the esthetics of the environment while others are represented in a modern and cold way.

3.13. “Without a valid ticket”

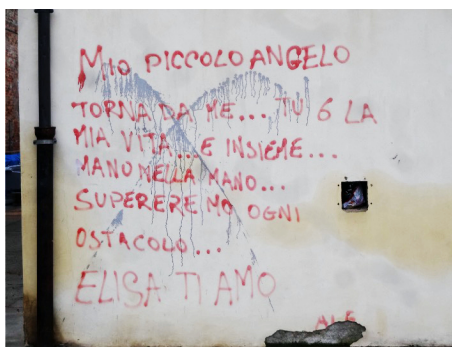
Where multilingualism in the public sphere is important.



Who: Public transport. *Where:* Berlin. *When:* 2023. *What:* warning to free riders. *Which language(s):* many. To *whom:* citizens and foreigners. *Why:* to make them pay the fare. *Whose permission:* the city's.

3.14. Mio piccolo angelo

Graffiti with an addressee in Venice: My little angel come back to me ... you are my life ... and together ... hand in hand ... we will overcome any obstacle ... Elisa I love you (Photo 09/2016).



Who writes? ALE. *Where:* Venice. *When:* ?? *What:* a plea, declaration of love. In *what* language: Italian.³ To *whom:* Elisa. *Why:* to get her back. With *whose* permission: without.

And who crossed it out?

3. *Editor's note:* Note the rebus-like style of writing “sei” (“you are”) as a digit “6,” also written “sei”.

3.15. Ayasofya からすみ専門店

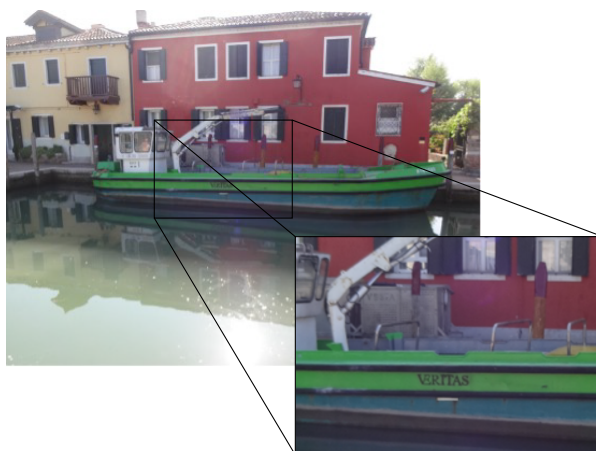
Solving a riddle: Why Japanese ads for smoked roe and beds covers in shop in Istanbul?



Who: shop owner. *Where:* Istanbul. *When:* 09/2014. *What:* ad, decoration. *Which language:* Turkish, English, Japanese. *To whom:* tourists, public. *Why:* commerce. *With whose permission:* ???

3.16. The truth: VERITAS

(VERITAS = Veneziana Energia Risorse Idriche Territorio Ambiente Servizi)



3.17. Signs of the times

In Venice, the truth is still expressed in the local language. In Tokyo, a city not known for the multilingual skills of its native population but which currently experiences a high rate of immigration, the truth can now be expressed in many languages, at least when it comes to crossing the street.



3.18. 大文字 festival

About Japanese culture and the importance of writing in it: Chinese character 大 *dai* 'big' cut into a mountain outside Kyoto and lit at the Daimonji Festival in August. The purpose of the bonfires of the festival is to guide the spirits of the ancestors back to heaven.



4. Conclusion

I hope I have given you an idea or at least a presentiment of how full of surprises and unexpected features waiting to be discovered and analysed the linguistic landscape holds.

LL research can be approached from different disciplinary angles. To begin with, since nowadays every LL is located in a state, you may want to ask whether there are any legal norms regulating the public display of writing. To take an obvious example, graffiti is widely considered a crime that exposes the writer/artist to civil liability for the damage to the defaced property. This is why the last one of my seven *wb*-questions refers to permission. Are there any such laws? If so, what is the contents? Does it contain a definition of “graffiti”? How severe is the penalty? Have there been any interesting precedents? These are just some of the questions to be pursued in this connection.

Example: The Indonesian Presidential Instruction No. 14/1967 (Inpress No. 14/1967) on Chinese Religion, Beliefs, and Traditions effectively banned any Chinese literature and cultures in Indonesia, including the prohibition of displaying Chinese characters in public.

Politically motivated renaming of street names, e.g., a segment of the street where the Soviet embassy was located in Washington DC, in 1984 was renamed Andrei Sakharov Plaza, after the jailed physicist and Soviet dissident.

Quite recently, in December 2022, the Nachtigalplatz in Berlin, so named after the German empire’s commissioner for West Africa who played an important role in the German colonisation of Togo, Cameroon and Namibia in the 1870s, has been renamed Manga Bell Platz in memory of Rudolf and Emily Duala Manga Bell, a king and queen of Duala in Cameroon who fought against German colonialism. The examples of taking issue with historical legacies in street names are many, and often they come along with fierce debates between different interest groups. In the event, historical memory wasn’t eradicated, but the question what should be remembered was answered differently.

Next, *education*. The socialist core values publicly exhibited in Chinese cities are an example of an authority claiming the linguistic landscape for purposes of education. The political motivation is very obvious here, but when we start asking why streets are named as they are, we will find a variety of reasons, political ones among them. Since the appreciation of politicians and political events is historically contingent, evading the necessity or desire of renaming streets is also an option. In Tokyo, for example, most streets have no name. One’s address is just a number code. Or consider New York city. 5th Avenue, surely one of the best-known streets of the US if not the world, will never have to be renamed.

There are beautiful street names, such as *Love Lane* in London, frightful ones, such as *Calle dei assassini*, Assassin Street, in Venice, and run-of-

the-mill street names, such as *Main Street* or *Rue de l'Église*, Church Street, the most common street name in France. Just names, you may want to say, but it actually matters. Street names are residents' addresses, and there are popular and unpopular addresses. Remember Monopoly, the ultimate capitalist parlour game? Streets are ordered there for value, Park Avenue being the most expensive. Research has shown that street names affect real estate prices. There are hence also *economic* aspects of the linguistic landscape—among others.

The lesson that I draw from these observations is this. The Linguistic Landscape is all around us. Wherever we go, it is a multifarious configuration of languages, authors, readerships, passers-by, observers, supervisors, censors driven by political, social, educational, cultural, and economic motives guided by and transgressing standards of writing in public, all of which can be studied with equal benefit for our understanding of the ever-changing dynamics of language in society. Because of this *multiformity*, it is not surprising that there is *no generally agreed on definition of LL*, nor is there one theory that can direct its investigation. The linguistic landscape is an artefact that keeps changing as society evolves. There are always new things to discover in the linguistic landscape, such as this Chinese character addressed to spirits to find the way to eternity.