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English in the Urban Linguistic Landscape:
From Lingua Franca to "Lingua Symbol"
A Brief Overview of Case Studies

Abstract

The main aim of this article is to offer a brief overview of various recent studies that have dealt with multilingualism in the urban linguistic landscape (according to Landry/Bourhis), in Europe and in the rest of the world, with special emphasis on the results regarding English. English is today considered the quintessential *lingua franca*, in that it is almost constantly and variously present in the linguistic landscape in many cities in the world, from store signs to directions for tourists, from messages in shop windows to commercial billboards. The studies discussed, in addition to confirming this role as *lingua franca*, highlight the growing use of English as a language symbolic of globalization, multiculturalism and prestige.

Sommaire

L'objectif principal de cet article est d'offrir un bref aperçu de recherches récentes et variées qui se sont penchées sur le multilinguisme dans le cadre du paysage linguistique urbain (selon Landry/Bourhis), que ce soit en Europe ou dans le reste du monde, en prêtant une attention particulière aux résultats concernant l'anglais. On sait que l'anglais est aujourd'hui la *lingua franca* par excellence et que, en tant que telle, elle est présente de manière diversifiée mais constante dans le paysage linguistique de nombreuses villes du monde: on l'aperçoit aussi bien sur les enseignes des magasins que sur les panneaux d'informations touristiques, sur les affichettes des devantures ou les annonces publicitaires. Outre à confirmer ce rôle de *lingua franca*, les recherches ici évoquées soulignent l'accroissement de l'utilisation de l'anglais en tant que langue symbole de la mondialisation, de l'internationalité et du prestige.

Zusammenfassung

Das Hauptziel dieses Artikels ist, einen kurzen Überblick über verschiedene Studien zu geben, die Multilingualismus in der städtischen Sprachlandschaft (gemäß Landry/Bourhis), in Europa und dem Rest der Welt, wobei insbesondere die Ergebnisse zu Englisch berücksichtigt werden. Englisch gilt heute als die *lingua franca* schlechthin, angesichts der Tatsache, dass es fast fortwährend und in vielfältiger Form in der sprachlichen Landschaft vieler Städte in der Welt zu finden ist: von Ladenschildern bis zu Anweisungen für Touristen, von Botschaften im Schaufenstern bis zu kommerziellen Anschlagtafeln. Neben der Bestätigung dieser Rolle als Lingua-Franca-Sprache unterstreichen die Studien den steigenden Gebrauch des Englisch als Sprachsymbol für Globalisierung, Multiculturalismus und Prestige,

The aim of this article is to briefly explore a range of research results that deal with multilingualism in the urban linguistic landscape of Europe and the rest of the world. The main objective is to focus on the results concerning the presence of English in the urban linguistic landscape (henceforth LL). Before turning our attention to the use of English in the LL of cities, it is worth considering a definition of the LL.

It is evident that *landscape* can have at least two meanings (Gorter 2006: 1). It can either refer to natural scenery or to a picture of portraying a natural landscape, such as a view of the countryside or of a mountain. Interestingly, when it comes to describing the linguistic landscape of a given city or area, "one can say that both meanings are also used. On the one hand the literal study of the languages as they are used in the signs, and on the other hand also the representation of the

languages, which is of particular importance because it relates to identity and cultural globalisation, to the growing presence of English and to revitalisation of minority languages" (Gorter 2006:1).

Certainly, the idea of the LL can lend itself to a variety of interpretations; it could, for instance, indicate the number of languages that coexist in a multilingual city, point to language diversity and even reveal the history of a given language (Gorter 2006). In recent years, however, the notion of LL refers more specifically to the various written messages that an individual encounters in city streets and public spaces; such as official notices, posters and traffic signs (Cenoz/Gorter 2006; Shohamy/Gorter 2009). This narrower and more focused notion of the LL, which takes into account all the written signs that we perceive in our cities – sometimes even unconsciously – has been defined by Landry and Bourhis in 1997 as follows:

> "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. The most basic informational function of the linguistic landscape is that it serves as a distinctive marker of the geographical territory inhabited by a given language community […]. The linguistic landscape can also provide information about the sociolinguistic composition of the language groups inhabiting the territory in question. Public signs can be unilingual, bilingual, or multilingual, thus reflecting the diversity of the language groups present in the given territory" (Landry/Bourhis 1997: 25).

There are two kinds of messages in the LL of cities: signs can be either *top-down* or *bottom-up* (Landry/Bourhis 1997; Gorter 2010; Backhaus 2006). Typically, *top-down* signs are posted by city authorities to signal official information, such as street signs, traffic signs, information about historical buildings and sites, including information about ministries, schools, parks and public transportation (Landry/Bourhis 1997: 26). Private, or *bottom-up*, signs are those that pertain to shops, private businesses and advertisements. While most public signs tend to use the local language and also English as a *lingua franca*, 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. For this reason, sociolinguistic research on multilingualism is bound to find more relevant data in private signs. Such research can provide reliable information about the cultural and linguistic diversity of a given area. However, public signs can also, in many cases, be bilingual or multilingual, "with the language of the dominant group being displayed more prominently" (Landry/Bourhis 1997: 26).

All the signs in the various languages present in the LL of a city obviously convey information; however, they also carry a symbolic meaning, especially if their presence in the LL is prominent. This is particularly the case in multilingual societies. The concept of objective and subjective 'ethnolinguistic vitality', in fact, means that "the prevalence of the in-group language on public signs can symbolize the strength or vitality of one's language group on the demographic and institutional control front relative to other language communities within the intergroup setting" (Landry/Bourhis 1997: 28).

Ever since Landry and Bourhis formulated their theoretical definition of the LL, a considerable number of research projects have been carried out in an attempt to study the visibility and vitality of languages in multilingual and urban contexts. However, sociolinguistic studies in urban areas had already been carried out in the past in an attempt to explore specific language uses and to determine language change. The city had already been the focus of important studies. Labov (1966), for example, studied language variation in the urban context, while Halliday (1978) focused his research on the city and how inhabitants perceive the urban environment in which they live. The contribution that followed in the wake of Landry and Bourhis's definition of the LL provided new

research perspectives and the possibility of exploring the actual vitality of languages in a given territory by recording their presence.

English plays a special role in the LL of many urban settings. On a global scale, in today's complex and increasingly multilingual urban realities, English fulfills at least two main functions. First, it plays an important role as the main *lingua franca* by providing information to tourists, who are simply visiting temporarily, and to immigrants, who do not speak the native language of the country where they reside. Many *top-down* signs written in the native language and posted by the authorities are translated into English, thus becoming bilingual signs. If there is more than one official language, the signs are likely to be multilingual. Second, the use of English in urban settings can be viewed as highly symbolic and prestigious. As already mentioned, this is especially true for *bottom-up* signages.

Many studies of the LL specifically deal with the presence of advertising and shop signs in urban streets, and deliberately choose not to consider public signs, street signs and tourist information messages. To be sure, commercial signs and billboards, both for the language and the images that they display, form a considerable part of the LL, even though the LL as such is not limited to them. Certainly, the commercial messages that it is possible to find in the LL can be viewed as the "middle earth" between the LL and advertising *per se*. It goes without saying that the presence of English in commercial signs is widespread. As Piller remarks (2003: 175), "internationally, English has become a general symbol of modernity, progress, and globalization". Thus many studies dealing with advertising in the LL have focused on the use of English (Collins/Slembrouck 2004).

The various studies on the LL, whether dealing with commercial and shops signs or with the totality of signs to be found in the LL, can be divided into two groups representing two lines of research. The first group is mainly concerned with findings regarding only signs in English, focusing both on its symbolic nature and its special role as the language of international communication and prestige in the LL. The second group pays more attention to multilingualism as a whole and studies all the languages present in the urban LL. Unsurprisingly, English also has a considerable presence in this second group of research, thus confirming its omnipresence in the LL of many urban realities worldwide.

Let us now briefly review some of the studies regarding the first group, which deal mainly with the findings for English. For reasons of space, we will focus on a limited number of studies, selecting those that appear to be most significant as far as the results for English are concerned. Ross (1997), for example, after studying the shop signs of a neighborhood in Milan and noting that most of the shop signs were easily intelligible for non-English speakers, decides to define this special use of the language as 'International English'. Shop names such as *Black & White*, *Green Garden*, *Idea Books*, *Photo Express* indicate that:

> "English is today seen as an attractive and fashionable language. An English name lends an aura of chic prestige to a business, suggesting that it is part of the international scene, following the latest trends, up-to-date with the newest ideas. This aspect of English as an international language […] is perhaps too often underestimated. Yes, English is important for communication world-wide, but English is also important because of the prestige associated with English-speaking countries" (Ross 1997: 31).

Even when the language of the shop signs is off mark or grammatically misused, as in the case of *New Mike's Bar*, *Gadget's* or *Apply*, the prestige of their international appeal is not diminished.

McArthur (2000) studies shop signs in Zurich and Uppsala. He records many English words in his study, but rather than referring to 'international English' he prefers to use the term 'Interanto' to

describe this phenomenon, since many of the words used in shop signs derive from a number of languages and do not belong solely to English: *apotheke, genius, city, video*. Thus, what favors the intelligibility of these words is the common cultural and etymological roots shared by many European languages. English, then, would seem to act more as a vehicle of mediation among these languages. Maria Schlick (2002, 2003) carried out two quantitative research projects on the use of English and the multilingualism of shop signs in four European countries adopting a comparative perspective (Austria, the UK, Italy and Slovenia). Apart from the UK, she finds that English is used most often in Austria and Slovenia (36%).

Griffin (2004) explores the presence of English in 17 streets in downtown Rome and in the EUR [Esposizione Universale Roma] neighborhood, recording all the visible signs, including both public and private signs, street signs, store fronts, public buildings, billboards, advertisements and even graffiti (Griffin 2004). The presence of English is noteworthy in the center of Rome, albeit not uniformly in all the streets, while the EUR area has fewer instances since it "contains fewer popular tourist attractions" (Griffin 2004: 6). Two-thirds of the English terms appear most commonly outside commercial businesses, and usually consist of only a few words. The most common words are well known internationally, like "*American, express, visa, international, club, diners*" (Griffin 2004: 7), while others display more complex terms: *crumbles, handicraftsmen, java, nailcare* (Griffin 2004: 6). The use of English as a *lingua franca* and its symbolic aspect, aimed at constructing an international image, are both present.

Dimova (2007) explores the use of English shop signs in the city of Veles, in Macedonia. The results show a common current trend in the country, as English is the second most prevalent language after Macedonian. The typology of the business influences the extent to which English is present: "Internet cafés, hospitality establishments, and boutiques had the largest percentages of such signs, while butchers, barbers, bakeries, and pharmacies had the lowest percentages of English elements in their signs" (Dimova 2007: 23). Dimova underlines the fact that the English words target everyone in Macedonia, even people who are not very proficient in English. Thus "even if the English elements are incomprehensible for some, they can be attractive because of the prestige and wealth associated with them" (Dimova 2007: 24).

The study by Hasanova (2010) is based on 97 shop signs and services in various neighborhoods of the city of Burhara, in Uzbekistan. The use of English in Uzbekistan is recent, due to the fact that during the Cold War (1947-1991) English, which was viewed as representing Western imperialism, was banned. Today the situation is reversed, and English is welcome in the country. It has spread considerably in commercial signs, becoming a prestigious symbol of globalization and progress, not to mention elitism. The research outcomes reflect this positive attitude, as English is represented in 55.6% of the sample, particularly in supermarkets and electronics shops. Thus, English has become, in slightly more than a decade, "the leading language in shop and service names in Uzbekistan" (Hasanova 2010: 8).

The contribution of Shu-Chao Liu (2011) falls into the category of papers and articles that view the urban LL as a good teaching tool in classes of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) (see also Cenoz/Gorter 2008, Sayer 2010, Chern/Dooley 2014). Shu-Chao Liu developed a project to enhance language learning and stimulate students' awareness of English. In her work, before dealing with the practical aspects concerning teaching with the use of the LL, she describes the presence of English in Taiwan, and in particular in her hometown of Taichung. As Taiwan has become progressively more international and more open to foreign economic markets and workers, the presence of English has increased considerably. English is used in commercial signs, advertisements and even on cars. English has become a synonym of fashion and is considered

to be decorative and creative, especially if one considers the original names used for shops or advertising (Liu 2011: 47-48).

Seargeant (2009, 2011, 2012) worked extensively on the use of English in the Japanese urban LL. He argues that the use of English in advertising or in a given urban LL does not necessarily refer to either of the two major English-speaking nations: "English in the LL is not automatically equated with the UK, or the US. English as the hegemonic voice in advertising does not need to be understood; it needs first and foremost to be decoded as 'English'. This process of decoding overshadows a sense of the text's meaning, or even its internal coherence" (Blackwood/Tufi 2015: 186). Moreover, syntactic and spelling accuracy are not crucial elements when it comes to using English. The 'international orientation' of a company or a shop can be signaled by the simple fact that they use English when advertising their products or on their shop signs. A good number of studies underline the fact that English in particular can be perceived as a 'fetish' (Kelly-Holmes 2005). Thus "in the LL, where a language is perceived to be English it is often 'fetishized' […] whereby the reader projects into the sign a value which may or may not have a direct correlation with its material value" (Blackwood/Tufi 2015: 187). The use of English in commercial signs in the LL, as well as in advertising, serves to "foreground" the message in order to capture the reader's attention (Serra 2006). The use of English does not necessarily imply that people fully understand the meaning of the text. What is relevant is the impact that an English term may have on an individual, independent of its semantic aspect. The English word in itself is already a message.

Lanza and Woldemariam (2013) carried out research in a little studied area, the Global South. They explore the use of English in the LL of Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, focusing on how English is used for international brand names. The general economic development of Addis Abeba, mainly due to the investments of international corporations, has encouraged the use of English to advertise brands. Ethiopia is a multilingual territory, but this has not prevented English from expanding considerably in the LL of Addis Abeba through general signage, well-known brand names and advertisements. As a result, English is now increasingly perceived as being linked to modernity and prestige.

A second group of studies deals with multilingualism in general and not exclusively with English. Among the studies that mainly deal with the LL, particular mention should be given to Rosenbaum et al. (1997), which analyzes private and public signs in Jerusalem (Backhaus 2006). Backhaus notes that such studies are usually carried out in countries where there is evidence of a language problem or conflict. Among these it is worth mentioning the work by Tulp (1978) in Brussels; Monnier (1989) in Montreal and Jerusalem (Spolsky/Cooper 1991) and another study by Calvet that compares shop signs in Paris and Dakar (Calvet 1990, 1994). Backhaus (2006: 53-54) has recorded various studies on the LL; he mentions Itagi and Singh's research (2002) of the LL in India. The research carried out by MacGregor (2003) focuses on multilingualism in Tokyo, where she analyzed 120 commercial signs. Half of the signs are either exclusively in English or bilingual (Japanese and English). When used with Japanese, English "function(s) to embellish the Japanese and to a lesser extent to communicate meaning on their own" (MacGregor 2003: 22) thus, the symbolic function of English seems to be more evident than the communicative function. This result seems to be confirmed by other research on commercial signages in various parts of the world (Friedich 2002; Stewart, Fawcett 2004). Born (2004) carried out a study in two cities in Southern Brazil, where Italian and German signs are explored. Reh (2004) studies the plurilingual population of Lira, in Uganda.

Like MacGregor (2003), Backhaus (2006) also studies Tokyo's LL. English terms are present in 98% of the 12,000 signs he gathered. English, which frequently occurs along with Japanese in bilingual messages, is used both in private and public signs. His research confirms the hegemonic

role of Japanese, as well as the clear distinction between public and private signs in the LL. In public signs in particular, multilingualism is more common, thus confirming the role of English as the language of international communication. Seargeant (2009), who carried out research on the LL in Japan, confirms the fact that the use of English is connected to globalization, social aspiration and modernity.

Bagna and Barni (2006) studied multilingualism in Rome's multi-ethnic Esquilino neighborhood by adopting a multimethodological approach, supported by the use of technology. There are at least 24 languages used in the area, whether written or spoken, and the aim of the research was to record all the languages in order to establish their "vitality". With this aim, various written text formats were gathered, such as shop signs, brochures, posters, billboards, ads, personal messages and even restaurant menus. Spoken data were also recorded, such as everyday conversations occurring, for instance, at the market or at the local school. This information was then classified by considering the following elements: the language used, text genre, localization, domain and the context of use. In this way a map was created describing the use of the languages, whether written or spoken. English is one of the most widely used languages in the neighborhood, both as a *lingua franca* and as a language of prestige. It is accessible to different typologies of speakers with various degrees of knowledge of the language. English is used in many multilingual messages, together with Italian or other immigrant languages.

Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) compares multilingualism in various urban settings in Israel, in particular in East Jerusalem, to determine the degree of visibility of the three main languages - Hebrew, Arab and English. The data include *top-down* and *bottom-up* messages gathered in areas inhabited by three distinct communities: Israeli-Jewish, Israeli-Palestinian and non-Israeli Palestinian. Without discussing the rather complex patterns that these groups display in their LL signs, it suffices here to say that English, as expected, is prevalent in Jewish areas and also in the wealthiest areas of East Jerusalem. "English, among Jews as well as among non-Israeli Palestinians, serves for communication with people from outside the community, and at the same time, represents, under the influence of globalisation, a status symbol *per se*" (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006: 23).

The study by Cenoz and Gorter (2006) analyzes multilingualism in two European cities: Ljouwert in Holland and Donostia in the Basque country, in Spain. Together with the official languages, Dutch and Spanish, two minority languages are also used in both cities, namely Frisian and Basque respectively. English is also employed, in both areas, as the language for international communication, and it is preferred over German and French. In *top-down* and *bottom-up* messages, English is more common in Ljouwert, immediately after Dutch and followed by Frisian, while in Donostia, English is the third language after Spanish and Basque.

Huebner (2006) explores the LL in 15 neighborhoods of Bangkok, Thailand. In this work English is also found in bilingual messages together with Thai and Chinese. The majority of the messages that use English are located in modern neighborhoods, which are mainly inhabited by middle-class people. English is also used to communicate with tourists, confirming the dual role of English as a *lingua franca* and a language of prestige.

Gorter (2010) carried out a quantitative and qualitative study in four Roman neighborhoods, including the Esquilino area, downtown Rome, Trastevere and the Termini railway station, where 73% of the signs are *top-down* and bilingual (Italian and English). Written signs were recorded in the four areas, including small brand logos. Overall, in the corpus there is a high number of *bottom-up* messages that use English, mostly in the Esquilino area; significantly, English appears in a quarter of the research sample as a whole, whether alone or with another language, but its

presence is more significant in the city center and near the Termini railway station. As Gorter notes: "It is clear that the relatively frequent use of English is aimed at the tourists from many different countries around the world that visit Rome every year. The distribution shows that the extent to which English is used as a language of wider communication or lingua franca in a tourist city like Rome is geographically limited" (Gorter 2010: 48).

In their book entitled *The Linguistic Landscape of the Mediterranean*, Blackwood and Tufi (2015) explore the uses of English in the LL of French and Italian Mediterranean locations, including Liguria, Nice, Monaco, Trieste, North Catalonia, Sicily, Sardinia, Marseilles and Naples. In their conclusion, they assert that English has become the defining characteristic of cosmopolitanism in the LL and as such it acts as a semiotic resource and stylistic device and practice. "English is without doubt the most prominent of all languages after French and Italian in our surveying of the public space" (Blackwood/Tufi 2015: 186). Apart from tourists and a small cosmopolitan elite, some of the shop and commercial signs seem to be directed at the Italian public, while others, such as *Phone center* in a street in Genoa, are instances of *lingua franca*, mainly directed at immigrants. In France, many stores and commercial activities also use English to name their companies or in advertisements, although English seems to be slightly less pervasive in France than in Italy.

The 15 chapters that make up the book *Negotiating and Contesting Identities in Linguistic Landscapes,* edited by Blackwood, Lanza and Woldemariam (2016)*,* address crucial sociolinguistic issues of language, culture and identity in the LL. The contribution of the book seems to go further than simply gathering and commenting on data to obtain a portrait of the LL in a given territory. Cultural, sociolinguistic, economic and political factors are discussed as potentially influencing the identity construction of people and groups belonging to different ethnicities. The different studies were carried out in Europe, Africa and Asia. English is obviously mentioned, but the core interest of these studies is the local languages and their role in the construction of identity.

In conclusion, this short, and by no means exhaustive, review of research projects concerning the urban LL signals the fact that this area of study is clearly growing. The results regarding the functions of English in particular confirm its role as a tool for official and international communication, as well as its symbolic function as a language of prestige. The studies all confirm, albeit to different degrees, the dual role that English holds as a lingua franca, internationally understood by most individuals, and its symbolic role as a language of prestige, progress and globalization. Sometimes these two functions are intrinsically connected, while at other times one function is more dominant than the other. For instance, when a message in English is clear, especially in a top-down message, its communicative function emerges more unequivocally. In contrast, if the message in English is somewhat obscure, displaying technical or unusual vocabulary, the symbolic function can be easily perceived, as the message conveys a sense of modernity, cosmopolitanism and globalization. It has been observed that "the process of globalization is made visible through the presence of English in the LL" (Gorter 2006: 81), to the point that English can be perceived as a synonym of globalization. The prominence that English has gained in the urban LL of many countries reinforces the strength and popularity of this language. It is possible that additional pinpointed research projects on the presence of English in the LL of cities could add further linguistic, social and political insights into its possible uses in various sectors, such as education, communication and language policies.

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