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Is linguistic landscape necessary?

Joshua Nash

School of Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences, University of New England, Armidale, Australia

ABSTRACT

Linguistic landscape (LL) studies have primarily been undertaken by linguists not landscape scholars. By reviewing two works in LL, this review article questions several assumptions of LL and claims the field can be considered a logical extension of any holistic consideration of elements of analysis warranted to be carried out under the banner of traditional sociolinguistics. By questioning what the sub-field of LL offers studies of language in and of landscape, this polemic queries how landscape focused LL actually is and identifies how further LL studies may arise with a more directed landscape emphasis.

KEYWORDS

Landscape and language;
language and context;
linguaging; linguistic
domains; signs; theory

Ethnography, superdiversity and linguistic landscapes: chronicles of complexity, Jan Blommaert, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2013, 144 pp., £69.95 (hardback), ISBN: 9-781-78309040-2

Linguistic landscapes, multilingualism and social change (Sprache, mehrsprachigkeit und sozialer wandel. Language. Multilingualism and social change. Langue, multilinguisme et changement social - Volume 16), edited by Christine Hélot, Monica Barni, Rudi Janssens and Carla Bagna, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2012, 348 pp., £44.80 (hardback), ISBN: 9-783-631-61716-8

Signs

Language and landscape are obliged to each other. Language demands landscape, landscape expects language. Spatiality is at the centre of a mobile nexus of interaction between language and landscape and language in landscape. Linguistic landscape (LL) studies and linguistic landscaping are facets of modern (socio)linguistics, which attempt a reconciliation of language and space, semiotics and mobility, and self-image–world interactions. For some researchers, signs can take on quite a semiotic meaning. In LL research, signs tend to be quite literal and concrete. LL argues signs in the landscape are illustrative texts which can be read, photographed, probed and linguistically and culturally dissected. Signs scrutinised from an LL perspective elucidate how language, cultural priorities, power and politics operate within physically yet abstract landscapes-cum-landscapes. Sign research in LL studies analyses the relative visibility and salience of languages in the landscape, the authorship process and policy implications, among other points of consideration.

It is imperative to justify and contextualise my position. First, my question is 'is *linguistic landscape* necessary?' not 'is linguistic landscape *necessary*?' My focus is on the position of *linguistic landscape* within possible linguistic takes on landscape and plausible landscape stances on linguistics, not

necessarily the *necessary*, necessity or the need for LL to exist in and of itself. A subsidiary question is: Is LL merely a subfield of sociolinguistics focused on analysing language in its written and semiotised form in the public sphere?

Second, while I approach and critique language and landscape from several perspectives anchored in landscape and focused on LL, I concede that LL is by no means the only linguistic field of enquiry with connection to landscape. Among other disciplines, onomastics has a long and lively tradition of studying proper names in landscape, and in recent decades there has been a significant interest in the relationship between language and large-scale space from lexical, grammatical and pragmatic perspectives (e.g., Mark, Turk, Burenhult, & Stea, 2011 volume *Landscape in Language*). Tellingly, geographical information system (GIS) research has become an increasingly important tool for a range of linguistic subfields. Two corollary questions are: If LL is methodologically and theoretically mainly linguistic, is it relevant to landscape at all? And if LL is not relevant to landscape research, is LL only nominally relevant and applicable to landscape?

LL most commonly takes its point of departure as linguistics rather than landscape studies. As a result, definitions of LL which concern 'the use of language in its written form in the public sphere' (Gorter, 2006, p. 2) and 'any sign announcement located outside or inside a public institution or a private business in a given geographical location' (Ben-Rafael, 2009, p. 14) tend more towards describing the regulatory role language, primarily signs, plays and exhibits in (the) landscape rather than the sway of landscape in creating and managing languaged environments. This discrepancy is weighty, because, as the authorship of the two volumes under review along with other LL works reveals, the overwhelming majority of LL scholars are sociolinguists and applied linguists not landscape researchers.

For over a decade, a gamut of research has developed which straddles sociolinguistics and which studies explicitly the language of and in public and private, physically realised and more abstractly manifested signs. While this research can be labelled postmodern, a moniker Blommaert accurately attaches to his work on linguistic complexity in contemporary, mobility-governed societies, LL finds its feet on older and more classical sociolinguistic bedrock. This core is far from new and advances on perennial (historical) linguistics foundations, which, when applied to physical and especially multilingual urban environments, by definition must involve a semiotic and sign-propelled investigation into the nature of language interacting with (the) landscape. As such, I do not believe LL is necessarily conceptually new, as Blommaert posits in the theoretical explication to his work (pp. 2–3). In contending that LL 'can act as a first-line sociolinguistic *diagnostic* of particular areas' and that LL 'compels sociolinguists to pay more attention to *literacy*' (p. 2, emphasis in original), Blommaert anchors his consideration of LL within a diachronic and *historicised* sociolinguistic analysis. The methodological and theoretical thrust of LL can be posed as a logical extension of any detailed consideration of elements of analysis necessitated under what can be considered traditional sociolinguistics.

Moreover, if LL is old (linguistic) wine freshly housed in new (sociolinguistic and landscape) bottles, what do the expressions *linguistic landscape(s)* and *linguistic landscape studies* add to these fields? Although LL might be new to landscape studies and may be a recently developed appellative in linguistics, I believe the details of LL have been, at least philosophically, addressed in earlier linguistic work. Despite my critical position, I believe LL studies do have a worthy contribution to make both to linguistics and to landscape research. This review article attempts to assess this offering. The possible contribution of LL to landscape and landscape to LL is potentially enormous. A methodological and theoretical offering relating cultural and physical landscapes, place-space, names, time and linguistics is definitely alluring. Still, scholars disagree on the scope of LL and research questions and techniques are still being formulated: 'the methodologies employed in the collection and categorisation of written signs is still controversial' (Tufi & Blackwood, 2010, p. 197).

I consider two LL publications—a single-authored monograph and an edited compendium—from a landscape perspective; I offer plausible answers to my question in light of contemporary research directions within both (socio)linguistics and landscape perspectives on language. In other words: if we do our sociolinguistic analysis, applied linguistic analysis and landscape analysis adequately, is

there any need to create a separate subfield of analysis of LL? By creating a separate subfield, are we complicating an already complex field of linguistic analysis or are we broadening our linguistic analysis to incorporate landscape studies? And what then does applying the monikers *language* and *linguistic* to landscape achieve in and for landscape studies? My piece should be relevant to linguists and scholars of landscape; it should provide a basis upon which an epistemological questioning of the assumptions of the LL discipline may lead to better and more developed research within the very bounds of LL under the banner of sociolinguistics and landscape studies.

I posit that my polemic warrants theoretical and methodological reflection for linguists already working on LL studies and to be preliminary yet not cursory or trivial for landscape scholars for whom LL studies remain new and relatively unexplored. Because most of the LL literature takes its point of departure as (applied) linguistics, appraising LL under landscape research is of consequence. This is why I have focused this piece more on a landscape-prompted critique of LL rather than advancing a technical linguistic position. As a result, my piece is appearing in this journal instead of any number of possible linguistics outlets.

The position I take is intended to be leading and provocative. Because much has been written within LL studies and its several parallel fields, I will not review any of the LL canon.¹ The amount of LL literature is too much and unnecessary to survey, so I restrict myself to considering perspectives which are current and which express a reflective element regarding how signs can be produced and interpreted. In addition, this review article is focused as much on linguistic-centred form as landscape-driven substance. The first work under review is one such reflective work.

Blommaert (2013)

This short monograph is an up-to-date mobility, LL and language (super)diversity driven applied sociolinguistic foray into many complex issues on the plate of the contemporary sociolinguist. Blommaert's theoretical thrust rests on a well-hewn and considered bed of Labov-, Fishman-, Gumperz- and Hymes-inspired sociolinguistics. Because Blommaert uses the metaphor of 'layer upon layer' (p. 8) to describe the nature of superdiversity within the complex and mobile LL, I believe it is appropriate to extend this metaphor to how modern sociolinguistic scholarship can be considered a composting of previous ideas. His interpretation and action of LL then is old (socio)linguistic wine in new diachronic + synchronic landscape regarded bottles. Composted LL wine can apparently appear as new theoretical supply for contemporary work on cultural, language-inspired landscapes.

In the series editors' preface to Blommaert's volume, editors Pennycook, Morgan and Kubota (p. xi) interpret Blommaert's work as a need for interpretive textual ethnographies rather than mere textual analysis. This infers accurately the nature of much sociolinguistic analysis and implies that contemporary works must look beyond the 'one function, one meaning' idea which drives research into synchronic analyses of language and discourse. This volume builds upon Blommaert's and other scholars' work in the field of a synthesised and semioticised sociolinguistics. The scope of the author's take on how modern scholarship must involve and concern new and dynamic interpretations of cultural and linguistic complexity and diversity as measured by, among other things, analysis of the LL forms the majority of the theoretical claims in the work. The book presents LL case studies woven into and reflecting on key tenets in classic and modern sociolinguistic research: the notion and problem of synchrony; bodies, spaces and landscapes; semiotics, change and transformation; complexity, superdiversity and modernity.

Blommaert uses LL studies as an explorative ethnographically focused methodological tool and a first-line sociolinguistic (and landscape) diagnostic of cultural landscapes. This treatment of actual signs in landscapes and posing LL as a young discipline requiring more work and theoretical maturity implies a historicised sociolinguistics. It is here Blommaert's work offers much to linguists and landscape scholars: it is a call to task to take sociolinguistics beyond a synchronic-cum-achronic focus into a temporally aware, diachronically and synchronically astute, historicised language- and landscape-based

culmination. Linking sociolinguistics with landscape studies implicating 'The Order of Superdiversity', 'The End of Synchrony' and an ardent interdisciplinarity is but one of Blommaert's achievements.

The short book is easy to read and is accessible enough for advanced undergraduates and yet sufficiently sophisticated for LL, sociolinguistic and cultural landscape researchers. With a lack of an explicit foregrounding of the relevance of LL to landscape, it is unlikely hardcore landscape scholars will be satiated. The reader familiar with Blommaert's sociolinguistic work will recognise several familiar arguments from previous publications. However, this bold and encompassing musing involves enough new material and reworked and reconsidered older material that the result is a convincing polemic. The strength and confidence with which Blommaert argues his case is impressive. Whether his critics remain unpersuaded matters little. This volume impels the reader to consider whether LL leads to a more aware, less synchronically preoccupied sociolinguistics, a sociolinguistics which would avail nobly from the benefits derived from the open-minded offerings of LL.

Hélot, Barni, Janssens and Bagna (eds. 2012)

Regarding LL methodologies, I believe well-known LL researcher Durk Gorter overlooks the required skill and astuteness demanded of an LL fieldworker-cum-practitioner. His perspective plays down not only the ubiquity of the tools of the trade, but also the theoretical and methodological options open to students of LL:

Taking photos of the LL requires hardly any effort and poses no particular difficulties (Gorter, in Foreword to Hélot et al. 2012: 9).

I disagree and feel taking such a perspective undermines the seriousness and insight required of an LL scholar or any sociolinguist or landscape student who uses photographic means to interact with and collect data in languaged landscapes.

In his Foreword, Gorter brings our attention to the linguistic clutteredness of our urban landscapes. He highlights the visual pollution in modern linguistic and landscape overstimulation, and believes it is the responsibility of LL and landscape researchers in general to bring our attention to the nature of this pollution and seek methods not only to document it but also to change it. The 20 chapters in English and French cover LL and policy, LL and languaging (the act of bringing language into action and into landscapes), reading and interpreting the LL and the mapping of LL within landscapes of multilingualism. Here LL is applied to areas of sociolinguistic research which are already well established and directed. Where the Blommaert volume is theoretically cohesive, perhaps because it is a sole-authored work, the Hélot et al. volume suffers from a distinct lack of unity, clarity and key conceptual thread. The result is a work which is more documentarily focused and thought-provoking rather than being notionally speculative and expressing or offering anything overly innovative and pioneering for language and landscape and LL studies. Because the book does not build from one chapter to the next, it would be difficult to extract large excerpts for teaching purposes. Still, based on its broad and eclectic nature, individual case studies could be used appropriately for upper level seminar courses.

While the editors hope 'this volume will contribute to expanding the scenery yet further again' (p. 23), an allusion to the title of Shohamy and Gorter's (2009) edited volume *Linguistic Landscape: Expanding the Scenery*, it is questionable as to how much this volume offers the burgeoning and nascent field of LL. The well-versed reader of the LL literature should not be surprised by the contents of the work, but will no doubt experience and benefit from new takes on already developed ideas such as the language of signs in political discourse and the relationship between script and code in writing systems in the LL.

Ground zero reductionism

In reviewing these works and their offerings to linguistic, landscape and LL research, I use the label 'ground zero' to describe an ideal state of (socio)linguistic and landscape studies research. Although it is arguable that linguistics and landscape studies should always be considered holistically, and while certain scholars have their own specialisations, with commonalities and contextualisations being equally

important, if one deals with the materials, the objects, the tools and the data one has to an adequate extent, one can arrive at a point of understanding the 'natural' form, function and the conceptual and cultural realities of these objects: at ground level, all landscape research which involves language is arguably linguistic and all linguistic research must somehow be landscape connected. This is because all 'linguaging', through the nature and necessity of the spatiality of language, happens in a specific place; spaces become places through language, through being named and through being signed. Named places in space constitute a linguistic and languaged landscape.

Such a 'ground zero reductionism' state of LL research might possibly lead any broad and holistic approach to linguistic and landscape research not to require a separate subfield of analysis marked or labelled as LL. As such, any applied linguistic analysis and its crossover to landscape studies should and must include and involve LL applications. Linguistic studies often necessitate landscape studies, and holistic landscape studies in multilingual urban areas must involve linguistic repercussions.

Returning to my question 'Is linguistic landscape necessary?' my answer is both yes and no. Linguistics needs landscape studies and vice versa, but LL studies do not exist alone from any other detailed sociolinguistic account of language in landscape. Blommaert himself is critical of sociolinguistics: 'sociolinguistics has never really been *comprehensive* in my view' (p. 3, emphasis in original). As one of the world's most renowned sociolinguists, this occurs as a surprise. While Blommaert's and Hélot et al.'s volumes go some way to involving a broader and encompassing scene for the future of language-landscape research, I must side with Blommaert's interpretation of sociolinguistics and extend it to landscape studies: there is a distinct need for an operative statement of a more detailed sociolinguistic stance on landscape studies. LL does implicate (physical) landscape, at least in its analyses of cultural landscapes, mostly in and of urban LLs. That LL is still firmly grounded primarily in linguistics should not only be a concern for landscape researchers working within languaged domains like onomastics; the landscape relevance of LL should be a matter of research commitment for linguists. While I have not proffered how such future work may proceed, what I have identified is how further LL studies may arise with more precise landscape attention.

Note

1. For a detailed historical survey of LL research, the interested reader is referred to Puzey (2016). Gorter (2006), Shohamy and Gorter (2009), and Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) provide an adequate description and theoretical explication of the field. Blommaert's summary of LL (p. 1) is brief but comprehensive.

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