

1 Approaching the Linguistic Landscape

1.1 A World of Signs: Signs in the World

The signage in Figure 1.1 is not particularly elaborate or spectacular, and it was probably not expensive to produce. Its simplicity illustrates the power of language display in the public space. On the left-hand side, the sign carries a single message in Spanish, English, and Arabic. The right-hand side contains further information about the functioning of the San Pablo UMC, the ‘United Methodist Church’: the address (given in English), the times of religious services (given in Spanish), the name of the minister of the church, and contact details by phone or Facebook. The Facebook page uses Spanish and English. As a way of using language to convey information, the sign is simple: the left-hand side is dominated by one message which is given three times, while the right-hand side contains largely practical information which can be understood without a high level of proficiency in English or Spanish. The address on the sign is not entirely new information, since the sign viewer will already be at that location in order to read the sign.

Like all signage, though, the sign unit in Figure 1.1 is not only a linguistic expression; it is also a text-bearing object. When we consider the object as text-bearing, our attention focuses on the use of writing systems and their expression through letterforms and indicators of textual organisation such as punctuation and rules for the direction of reading. Text, however, is only an abstraction. To be realised physically, the text also relies on layout, by which elements of text are ordered and placed relative to each other, and integrated with non-linguistic visual features such as colour, shape, and imagery. The left-hand side of the sign unit thus includes both a unity of focus (since all versions of the message are semantically equivalent and use white lettering against a coloured rectangular background) and a diversity of display, since each language uses its own writing system and coloured rectangles use green for Spanish, blue for English, and orange for Arabic. The greater visual similarity of Spanish and English (which share the use of the Roman alphabet and a left-to-right text vector, in contrast to the Arabic alphabet and the Arabic use of a right-to-left text vector) carries over onto the right-hand side of the

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Figure 1.1 Welcoming neighbours (Astoria, 2017)

text, in which one system of black letters is used against an orange background, and there is no distinction of typography or layout between English *Road* and Spanish *domingos* ‘Sundays’. The differences in capitalisation follow the respective rules of each writing system.

Considering the sign unit in Figure 1.1 as an object also draws our attention to the technology of writing, the material which the sign is written on, and the placement of the sign. Its size, location, and physical support or attachment are salient. We can note that the sign unit uses commercial printing on flexible plastic (probably vinyl), and that it is attached by plastic ties to a chain-link fence in front of the church which it references. The upper edge of the fence is visible in the photograph. It is not much more than a metre above the ground, so the signage is easily readable for passers-by. These physical features are all potentially meaningful: we can assume that the display of a brightly coloured plastic banner at the boundary between the church and the public footpath has a different effect from an equivalent linguistic expression engraved in stone in the fabric of the building itself.

Assessing the effect which a sign unit has on the viewer raises a third, essential, element in the LL, which is its role in discourse. Taken literally, the left-hand messages in Figure 1.1 express a fact about the emotional state of the institutional speaker: *we are glad* . . . Indirectly, however, and in a way that can only be understood with the help of more general knowledge, this expression of gladness is put forward as an act of welcoming. The first part of the

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Figure 1.2 Not all signs are in the LL (Arlington, 2016)

statement (*no matter where you are from*) addresses sign viewers from everywhere. The expression in three languages strengthens this address, since the three languages can be interpreted to stand for a much wider range of possible languages used by members of the public. Once addressed, the unknown sign viewer is no longer a stranger, but a *neighbor*. In changing the status of the sign viewer from that of stranger to that of neighbour, and in advertising times of being open to the public and ways of making further contacts, the institutional speaker (or *sign instigator*) thus extends an act of welcoming to a general public. Against a contemporary background of threats and hostility towards immigration and the use of languages other than English, the display of multilingualism in the act of welcoming strangers to engage with the sign instigator builds trust and motivates the text.

Demonstrating the centrality of the pragmatic element in the LL, Figure 1.2 shows what happens when signage is not displayed as an act of discourse in the landscape. The signs at the counter of a hardware shop in Figure 1.2 are well-formed linguistic texts that issue various instructions and warnings. The discourse status of the elements in this display is not immediately clear. If the elements are all intended as samples of merchandise for sale, the presence of signs in French is anomalous in Arlington, where French rarely occurs in the

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LL, apart from fragmentary use in restaurants or other domains which appeal to cultural prestige. The <CURB YOUR DOG> sign is also anomalous, since this phrase is strongly associated with New York City (see Figure 6.12A below). The <PETS WELCOME> sign uses the visual genre of regulatory signage, but is an ironic comment not to be taken literally. The display as a whole might thus show off exotic or amusing signs as a matter of general interest, or it may entice the customer with samples of merchandise: the difference can only be determined by asking in the shop. Either way, the display is based on the assumption that the sign viewer knows enough about the LL not to interpret the signs as genuine acts of instruction or warning: the viewer is not expected to read French <SORTIE> ‘exit’ and look for an actual exit. These text-bearing objects, then, are only potential players in the LL, with sign viewers expected to know that other elements of pragmatic intent are needed to transform them into *LL units*.

1.2 Entering the Linguistic Landscape

Figure 1.1 shows a linguistic text, produced and *emplaced* in a meaningful way that points to a specific space and a series of time-bound events within that space. The text comes from an identifiable sign instigator who takes responsibility for its content; it is addressed to a general public in order to achieve the sign instigator’s pragmatic objectives. In contrast, although the sign units in Figure 1.2 have the necessary features of text, layout, and physical production to accomplish certain pragmatic objectives (such as warning, prohibiting certain behaviour, or indicating an exit zone), the manner of their emplacement determines that they do not perform the speech acts which their texts spell out, but stand instead only as samples of possible speech acts. The role of the LL unit as a mediation between the sign instigator and the sign viewer is crucial, and provides a keynote for understanding the overview of LL data which this chapter is designed to provide. This section starts with an examination of code choices, followed by sections focused on space, discourse, and the historical dimension. I conclude with suggestions as to how this material points towards the sociolinguistic perspective to be developed in the chapters which follow.

1.2.1 Code Choices: Language Policy

The notion of *code choices* in the LL refers to the use of linguistic means to express meaning. Other modes which express meaning – from architecture and the use of space to the use of visual images, colour, and layout – are co-present with linguistic codes and are part of LL research, but linguistic codes provide a specific and, as I suggest in Chapter 8, inescapable focus within the LL. From the minimal sense of language as a socially conventional system for relating

the intrinsically meaningless elements of sound to meaning, however, there is no expectation that a language will be politically recognised, that it will have a socially agreed writing system (or indeed any writing system at all), or that languages will be ‘pure’ and autonomous from other languages. Even the modality of sound waves in the phonological component of language is not guaranteed, since sign languages have phonological organisation that feeds into morphology and syntax, but does not rely on acoustic sound (see Brentari, Fenlon, and Cormier 2018 for a review). The notion of code choices, then, is broad enough to allow for a wide range of codes on display, but retains the idea that linguistic codes are different from other systems within the range of semiosis.

Since one of the original motivations for LL research lies in the field of language planning (see Chapter 2), the illustration of code choices in this chapter starts with Figure 1.3, which displays language policies in action. These signs come from trains that cross internationally recognised political frontiers. Figure 1.3A shows a notice on a train journey which originates in Basle, Switzerland, and terminates in Cologne, Germany. The notice includes safety instructions in the three official languages of Switzerland: German, French, and Italian. Romansch also has official status in the Graubünden canton, but its non-inclusion in this notice underlines the difference between official status at the federal level and regional or local recognition. The bottom line in English raises questions. English does not have status as an official language in Switzerland, and it would be easy to view it here simply as a language of wider communication. Swiss census data cited by Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig (2019), however, show 4.8 million people who can speak English, which amounts to slightly more than half the population of the country; of this number, 425,000 people are first-language speakers of English. These figures suggest that globalisation, including the effects of population movement and second language learning, represents a challenge for notions of ‘what language is spoken where’ and how to interpret language display in the LL.

Figure 1.3A also shows the salience of the relative size and position of text across languages. In Figure 1.3A, the main messages contain the same information, and use the same letter shapes and sizes with black print against a white background. The descending order of German, French, and Italian reflects their relative standing in percentages of speakers in Switzerland (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2019). The word <Automatic!> on the top line, however, is printed in red using a larger type size. It is an English word form, and though it differs from German *automatisch*, French *automatique*, and Italian *automatica*, the shared etymology of these forms (ultimately from Greek αὐτόματος) makes <Automatic!> recognisable across language boundaries.

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Figure 1.3 Cross-border train notices – Basle–Cologne (2018); New York–Montreal (2017); Dublin–Belfast (2014)

Language policy is also in play in Figure 1.3D, from the Dublin–Belfast train. As this train crosses the political boundary between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the signage must be understood in relation to language policy in both jurisdictions. The message content is the same across all three languages, though English is given the most prominence, occupying the top position and using upper case letters. The use of English and Irish in public notices conforms to official signage regulations in the Republic of Ireland at the time, though more recent policy gives preference to putting the Irish language text above the English. In Northern Ireland, the default language of public signage is English, although the Local Government (Miscellaneous

Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 also provides for bilingual Irish/English street name plaques under certain conditions: see Dunlevy (2021) for a comprehensive review. Since these provisions are based on language use in local communities, facilities such as motorways and public transportation operating across Northern Ireland rarely include Irish. The Irish/English bilingualism in Figure 1.3D thus reflects a policy which is obligatory in the Republic of Ireland but unexpected in public transportation in Northern Ireland. The use of French on the bottom row of text does not follow from legal requirements or population demographics in either jurisdiction. The Dublin–Belfast train, however, was upgraded by a large cross-border train improvement scheme which received significant funding from the European Union at a time when the UK was still part of the EU. Since French is not used in domestic trains anywhere in Ireland, its occurrence in the sign of Figure 1.3D can be interpreted as a recognition of the role of the EU in facilitating cross-border transport and communication within the EU.

The signs in Figures 1.3B and 1.3C also come from a train line which crosses a political border. In this case, however, different language policies determine different language displays at either end of the Amtrak train journey between New York City and Montreal. Figure 1.3C shows an instruction in New York for passengers headed to Montreal. Although the train is going to a destination where French is the official language, and the passenger population can be expected to include a significant number of French speakers, all information is in English; the spelling <Montreal> reflects English language usage. Figure 1.3B shows the counterpart Canadian signage, addressed to passengers going from Montreal to New York. It uses a similar typeface and the same recognisable Amtrak colour scheme and logo (not shown in the photograph), but gives passenger information with French in top position and English below, in accordance with the law in Quebec. As we will see in Chapter 4, these signs do not exhaust the LL of the New York–Montreal train, but they give an indication of policy decisions at work.

1.2.2 Code Choices: Breaking Language Barriers

Though language policy usually refers to languages which exhibit various degrees of codification and standardisation, code choices in the LL frequently break free from norms of standardisation, mix innovatively between codes, and present texts which cannot readily be assigned to one language or another. Figure 1.4 illustrates this point with a sign from Reagan National Airport (DCA) near Washington, D.C. The large-scale signage overhangs a free-flowing seating area which is designed with short-visit transient customers in mind. Many airports are extraordinary zones in the LL, since they have an intermediate status between public and private space, show essential

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Figure 1.4 Playing with codes (DCA airport, 2016)

uniformity around the world, are designed to facilitate movement through the space rather than to provide opportunities for community discourse, and may have only weak ties to local culture, exemplified by the sale of local souvenirs which can actually be made anywhere in the world.

The code choices of the sign at the centre of the unit include an intentional hybrid of English *say* with French *si bon* ‘so good’. The resultant text <SAY SI BON!> is roughly homophonous with French *c’est si bon* ‘it’s so good’. The French meaning generates an advertising name that implies quality, and introduces an element of familiar exoticism for the Anglophone sign viewer, who may also know this phrase from the popular song ‘C’est si bon’, first copyrighted in 1948 and recorded by many artists since then (see *Second Hand Songs* website for further detail).

The use of a song title in an unrelated shop name introduces the element of *intertextuality*, which Bauman (2004: 4) describes as ‘the relational orientation of a text to other texts’. Leeds-Hurwitz (1993: 41) observes that intertextuality allows texts to “resonate” with meaning when they refer to previous texts, perhaps because they do not require as much work to decide how to interpret them’. Thus, with regard to Figure 1.4, intertextuality – addressed to a continuous flow of strangers in the unfamiliar and often intimidating atmosphere of an international airport – uses a familiar song text to make the unfamiliar more trustworthy. The linguistic hybridity of the inscription works at one level to attach a name to a place of business and to invite the sign viewer to become a

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which in an English language context references more recent, post-colonial language policy in India.

Most salient in the graphic presentation of the *Bombay* name, however, is the use of a horizontal line through the two characters and over the other lower-case letters to yield a visual effect that is (at least for the English-speaking reader) similar to the head line of the Devanagari script used for Marathi, Hindi, and many other languages of India. This use of iconicity creates an inscription which is meant to look ‘Indian’ to the sign viewer, enhancing the power of the signage to claim visual salience and cultural authenticity for the sign instigator. The sign viewer who recognises the resemblance can thus overlook the differences between Devanagari, in which the head line forms a functional part of the individual character, and English in which the horizontal line in the writing has no orthographic function. The modification of English language Roman typefaces in order to evoke features of other writing systems (at least as perceived by the designer and their intended audience) has been expanding since the nineteenth century. Kim and Kim (1993: 32), for example, document a ‘pseudo-Japanese’ font in the US from 1867 and a similar font known as *Japanese* in England two decades later: see also Sutherland’s (2015) discussion of ‘writing system mimicry’, Li and Zhu’s (2019: 151) definition of ‘transcribing’ as ‘the linguistic practice of creating a script with elements from different writing systems . . . or by mixing conventional language scripts with other symbols and signs including emoji’, and related analyses of Greek in online environments by Androutsopoulos (2015, 2020).

1.2.3 Code Choices: Conflict

While the code choices for the preceding signs show no signs of controversy, Figure 1.6 illustrates a conflict over code choices. The signage in Figure 1.6A shows a type which is common in Northern Ireland and can also be found with variations in northern parts of the Republic of Ireland (see Kallen 2014 for discussion). This type is immediately recognisable by its shape, text around the edge of the sign, and central image of a beer mug covered by a conventional red X denoting a prohibition: as I discuss in Kallen (2014), even the beer mug image is significant, since it was popularised in the 1920s and 1930s and has now come to index not simply drinking alcohol in general, but local traditions of pub life.

The linguistic element in the signage of Figure 1.6A is purely in English, using the indirect phrasing that *it is an offence to drink alcohol in public places in this area*, rather than using a more direct form such as *do not drink alcohol here* or *drinking prohibited*. The element I focus on here is the expression of language conflict that arises in Figure 1.6B, where a sticker that reads As