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Linguistic Landscapes, Multilingualism and Social Change

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Between Script and Language: The ambiguous ascription of 'English' in the Linguistic Landscape

Summary

This chapter examines the relationship between choice of linguistic code and choice of script in the composition of signs within the linguistic landscape. It investigates the consequences of considering script choice as part of a given 'language', both in terms of the semiotic work performed by the sign (i.e. how it operates as a communicative act in a particular social context), and in terms of the conceptualisation of language by different communities. Drawing on examples of 'English' language signs from a variety of contexts, the chapter addresses the questions of what counts as 'English' in the linguistic landscape of diverse world contexts, what role script choice plays in the interpretation of this issue, and what the cultural consequences of ambiguities relating to this are for an understanding of the nature of English and English usage around the world.

Résumé

Ce chapitre examine la relation entre le choix de code linguistique et le choix d'écriture dans la composition des affichages présents dans le paysage linguistique. Il examine les conséquences d'un choix d'écriture envisagé comme faisant partie d'une 'langue' donnée, à la fois en termes de travail sémiotique accompli par l'affichage (c'est-à-dire comment il opère en tant qu'acte de communication dans un contexte social particulier) et en termes de conceptualisation du langage par différentes communautés. Faisant appel à des exemples d'affichages en langue 'anglaise' tirés de contextes variés, le chapitre pose les questions suivantes : que peut-on considérer comme de l'anglais dans le paysage linguistique présent dans différents endroits dans le monde, quel rôle jouent les choix de script dans l'interprétation de ces écrits et quelles sont les conséquences culturelles des ambiguïtés relatives à ces questions pour une compréhension de la nature de la langue anglaise et de son utilisation dans le monde.

1 Introduction: The Materiality of the Sign

The focus of this chapter is the relationship between choice of linguistic code and choice of script in the composition of signs in the linguistic landscape; the question

it addresses is what semiotic significance this relationship has for the way that signs are interpreted. The significance accorded to the materiality of the sign has tradition-ally been an issue which divides work done in theoretical linguistics from that in more socially-oriented studies of language. While research in theoretical linguistics has predominantly followed a line that can be summed up by Saussure's contention that "the actual mode of inscription is irrelevant, because it does not affect the [lin-guistic] system… Whether I write in black or white, in incised characters or in relief, with a pen or a chisel – none of that is of any importance for the meaning" ([1916] 1983, p. 118), research which explicitly examines language in its social context has always considered the material nature of the sign (that is, 'the actual mode of in-scription' or, for the spoken word, the mode and manner of articulation) an intrinsic aspect of human communication. Far from being of 'no importance for the mean-ing', material aspects of an utterance – be they accent, tone of voice, volume; or mode of expression, colour, size, etc. – are viewed in socially-oriented linguistics as a vital element in any real-life linguistic exchange. Voloshinov, for example, assem-bled his own theory of language only a decade after Saussure around the contention that "Signs are particular, material things" ([1921] 1986, p. 10), and saw this materi-ality as key to the social meaning with which language is imbued. The discipline of sociolinguistics has also in great part developed from studies which examine the way that variations in mode and manner of expression are related to, and thus ex-pressive of, dynamics in the social environs in which the language is being used. Foundational sociolinguistic work by Labov (1966), for example, focused on pro-nunciation variables and how these were of semiotic significance in terms of the per-formance of acts of socially-oriented identity. And while much of the work that ex-plores this aspect of language initially focused on speech, more recent work – espe-cially that which comes under the heading of multimodal research – has broadened the field of examination to look at the semiotic work achieved by the choice and combination of modes that are drawn upon in acts of writing. Van Leeuwen (2006), for example, has investigated the semiotics of typography, examining the way the composition of fonts in terms of shape, width, height and spacing conveys meaning. In all such research, the material nature of the sign is shown to have a semiotic sig-nificance which works in combination with the purely 'linguistic' content of an ut-terance.

   In this chapter I will explore a particular issue related to the materiality of the sign: that of the relationship between writing-script and linguistic code (or 'lan-guage'). I will examine this with reference to examples from the linguistic landscape in which the language in which a sign is written is in some sense at odds with (or is being modified by) the choice of script in which it has been rendered. The purpose of this investigation is twofold. Firstly, the intention is to explore the semiotic work that script choice plays in the linguistic landscape, especially in instances where it would appear that the use of a script is purposefully alluding to the cultural associa-tions of a different code. Secondly, the intention is to examine what part script

choice plays in the conceptualisation of different named languages, and what the semiotic and political consequences are of considering script choice as part of a given 'language'. As I aim to show, these two questions are in fact closely intertwined, as the meaning of a sign can, in many situations, depend on the way the language it is written in is conceptualised.

2 Concepts of English

In examining these issues, I will focus upon the case of English in the linguistic landscape of globalised contexts. This choice is motivated by the fact that the global spread of English and English-related forms has led to a plethora of instances in which the mixture of script, verbal content, and interpretive context is such that a straightforward ascription of which 'language' a sign is in can often be elusive. The case of global English thus lends itself well to this particular investigation, while also currently being the site for much theoretical debate about the very concept of discrete 'languages' and about whether socially-oriented linguistics is misguided to take the assumption of the existence of different, named languages as its axiomatic starting point (e.g. Pennycook, 2007; Seargeant/Tagg, forthcoming). Here also the issue of how languages are conceptualised is central, and so elements of this debate can inform the discussion of the script/code relationship. Given this context, therefore, we can reformulate the question at the heart of the chapter, and ask, with reference to the types of language display illustrated in the examples I will be analysing: Is this really English? and, What are the consequences of categorising these utterances as being in one language rather than another?

The question of what counts as 'English' is often used as an introductory device in textbooks on English Language Studies for the purpose of prompting student reflection on the variety and diversity of language behaviour in English-speaking communities (e.g. Swann, 2007). Its associations with this context may suggest that, despite its useful pedagogic function, it is of rather simplistic theoretical significance for more in-depth study of the nature of language use in society. The fact that many popular studies which take this as a prompt are predominantly descriptive in their ambition, and catalogue a range of the more bizarre instances of English usage (for example, the 'scrambled' usages of 'Chinglish' or 'Engrish') without any great probing of the significance and consequence of the nature of this usage (e.g. Croker, 2007; Radtke, 2007), compounds this impression. Yet the question does have a more serious and profound weight, and is one which can relate to a range of political, methodological, and semiotic issues. With regard to the politics of language, for example, the issue of what counts as English for different people in different contexts manifests itself in the way that people regulate and respond to the language, either informally or in institutional contexts. And as regulation of the language is, in effect,

regulation of language users, social practices which use a particular concept of English as their fulcrum or instrument are going to be explicitly political exercises.

The methodological consequences of the question relate to the metalinguistic conceptual vocabulary used to code and analyse linguistic data. The issue of what counts as English in this context involves differentiating between English and non-English, and thus evaluating (or constructing) the relationship between English and other languages. This is, in essence, a language-ideological process (Seargeant, 2009), and is one which has been much critiqued in recent metatheoretical discussions of the adequacy of traditional sociolinguistic methodologies (e.g. Blommaert, 2010). Much recent work on bilingual mixing, for example, has suggested that the metalinguistic vocabulary available to linguists for describing the complex semiotic strategies employed by people living in multilingual contexts is restricted by an ideology of discrete, and usually monolithic, languages and thus alternative conceptual terminology is needed to allow for more nuanced analysis (see, for example, Canagarajah, 2006; Jørgensen, 2008; García, 2009; Otsuji and Pennycook, 2010).

Finally, the semiotic consequences of the question of what counts as English relate to the connotations that adhere to the idea of the language in different contexts. Work on the symbolic cultural meaning ascribed to English in diverse cultural contexts points to the way that this meaning is in part a product of local cultural politics, and that certain instances of the display of the language in the linguistic landscape (for example, in t-shirt designs or advertising slogans) draw almost exclusively on these symbolic connotations, with the verbal content (and its ideational meaning) being of negligible importance (e.g. Seargeant, 2009).

All three of these consequences of the conceptualisation of language are pertinent for the role that the script/code relationship plays in the interpretation of signs in the linguistic landscape. And it is the contention of this chapter that both the functional intention and the pragmatic interpretation of signs relies on beliefs about the code (as an ideological construct) and its material expression (including the script it is written in), and this thus operates as an important aspect of the 'meaning' of any sign in the linguistic landscape, and is an issue which deserves theoretical analysis.

3 Script versus Language

To illustrate the often complex relationship between script and code, and to investigate the semiotic work performed by this aspect of the material nature of the sign, let us begin by examining a range of examples. These are taken from a variety of locations, both physical and virtual (i.e. Internet-based), and include visual language displays of various types. Unlike much work on the linguistic landscape, the intention here is not to map the language practices observable in a particular locale (e.g. Huebner, 2006), or to investigate the policy intentions of particular linguistic communities (e.g. Backhaus, 2009), but instead to theorise an aspect of the nature of

language display in the public domain. As such, the conception of the linguistic landscape being used is a very general one, and includes any instance of visual display where the readership is an open or public rather than private one. The selection criteria for the data were similarly eclectic, but adequate for identifying representative examples of the semiotic phenomena I wish to examine. For each of the signs chosen I will initially describe their content and context, before moving in the next section to an analysis of how they operate as semiotic artefacts. For each example, the initial question I wish to pose is simply whether the sign is in English or not. Using this question as a prompt, we can then attempt to unpack the way the script/code relationship relates to beliefs about the nature, value and connotations of different languages.
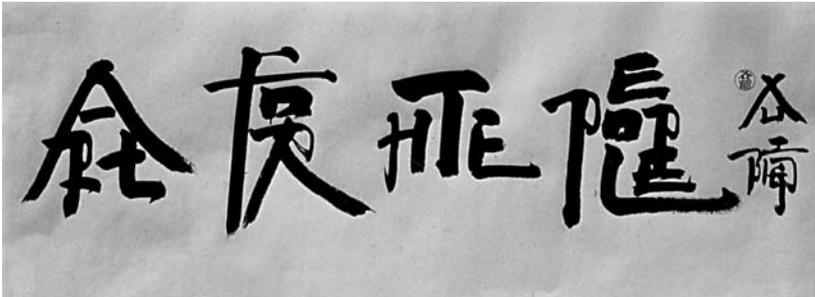

Figure 1:   Xu Bing, Square Word Calligraphy: 'Art for the People' (2002), ink on paper. (Reproduced from Xu Bing, 2004, p. 338)

The first example, illustrated in Figure 1, is from a series of artworks entitled 'Introduction to Square-Word Calligraphy' by the American-based Chinese artist Xu Bing. The appearance here is of a text written in Chinese – or at least, this is how I would suggest it looks to a non-Chinese reader. In fact, the text is written in English. Within the Chinese-character-like format, Xu has spelt out the English words 'Art for the people' using shapes which approximate to the Roman alphabet. For example, the middle 'character' is composed of a shape which approximates to the letter T in the middle, with an H and E on either side of this. The work was part of an exhibition in 1997 to mark the return of Hong Kong to China, and the relationship between English-language culture and Chinese culture is thus a central theme. Although Hong Kong was the original location in which the work was displayed, it has since been shown in exhibitions in over thirty places around the world (Xu Bing, 2006).

Figure 2: Leeds Asian festival; Thai simulation font; and FLY Flowers

The second example is an advert for a festival of Asian culture held in Leeds in the UK (Figure 2 top).[1] This is very clearly in English (and the cotext for the advert as a whole is exclusively English), yet is partially written in a script which resembles Hindi, thus symbolically representing the festival's thematic identity. This sort of semiotic strategy is quite common in branding or advertising contexts. Typographers refer to these as 'mimicry' or 'simulation' typefaces, where the intention is to create a font which is graphically similar to a different writing system, while still retaining the underlying shape and structure of the Roman alphabet. Figure 2 middle, for example, is a typeface created for the Roman alphabet which is meant to resembles Thai,[2] and the purpose behind its design is to address an English-reading audience about a topic related in some respect to Thailand. As with the Leeds Asian Festival, there is little ambiguity about which language the messages here are written in, but the English is rendered with the visual equivalent of a foreign accent.[3]

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1   www.leedsasianfestival.co.uk/ (accessed 4 October 2010). I am grateful to Beth Erling for providing this example.

2   www.weygandt.de/aw_siam/ (accessed 4 October 2010).

3   I am grateful to Barbara Mayor for suggesting this interpretation.

The next example (Figure 3 left) illustrates what appears to be a similar phenomenon, but one which does in fact have certain noticeable differences. This is an advert for the cosmetics company Lancôme. The advert is used in identical form on the company's English-language and French-language websites.[4] There are two points of interest here: the first is the name of the brand itself; the second, the nature of the language use in the strap line. The issue of which language brand names – especially those related to multinational companies – belong to is a complex one (cf. Edelman, 2009; Tufi and Blackwood, 2010). In this case, the use of the diacritic (the circumflex above the 'o') indexes association with the French language, at least in so far as the Roman alphabet as used by English does not contain this grapheme. The use of the circumflex is then repeated on two words in the strap line, thus further indexing Frenchness, although neither of these words are part of the French lexicon. One of the words ('Biômetric') would, but for the circumflex, be English; the other ('Diagnôs') is a further brand term, coined on a Greek root which has provided for both an English ('diagnose'/'diagnostic') and French ('diagnostic') word. This text thus uses resources from the script traditionally used to write French, but arranges them in a manner and context which has distinct Anglophone traces. And the issue of whether the advert as a whole is in 'English' or 'French' is, therefore, difficult to determine.

Figure 3: Lancôme advert; and 'Brüno' poster