

Linguistic Landscapes as Public Communication: A Study of Public Signage in Gaborone Botswana

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Abstract

The study of public signage is termed linguistic landscape (LL). Landry & Bourhis (1997) define the notion as “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (p.25). The present study intends to contribute to this development in Gaborone the capital city of Botswana. The aim of this study is to show that LL can provide valuable insight into the linguistic situation of Gaborone Botswana, including common patterns of language usage, official language policies, prevalent language attitudes, and the long-term consequences of language contact, among others. This was done by analyzing the data collected from specific public domains such as street signs, advertising signs, building names, warning notices and prohibitions, billboards, shop signs, informative signs (directions, hours of opening), etc. in Gaborone.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, Sociolinguistics, Language planning, Signage, English world-wide

1. Introduction

Signs are used in order to disseminate messages of general public interest such as topographic information, directions, warnings, etc. Public signs also appear in commercial contexts like marketing and advertising, where their function is to draw attention to a business or product (Backhaus, 2007, p.5). Public signs are a type of semiotic sign in that they too stand for something other than themselves. Thus, a public sign is a signifier that relates to a signified, such as a company, a product, a place, a rule, or some other concept. On the other hand, a sign indicates a direction on how to get to a place, as in the case of guidance signs, or simply call attention to it, as advertisement signs do. The aim of this study is to show that LL can provide valuable insights into the linguistic situation of urban cities in Botswana, including common patterns of language usage, official language policies, prevalent language attitudes, power relations between different linguistic groups, and the long-term consequences of language contact, among others (Backhaus, 2007, p.10).

2. On the Notion of Linguistic Landscape

Landry & Bourhis (1997) define linguistic landscape as the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region. Specifically, the notion refers to:

The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration (p.25).

Gorter (2006, p.2) holds that linguistic landscape research is concerned with 'the use of language in its written form in public sphere'. In the same token, Ben-Rafael et al. (2006, p.14) define the linguistic landscape as referring to 'any sign announcement located outside or inside a public institution or a private business in a given geographical location'.

Reh (2004, p.38) emphasized that the study of linguistic landscape enables conclusions to be drawn regarding, among other factors, the social layering of the community, the relative status of the various societal segments, and the dominant cultural ideals'. Ben-Rafael et al (2006) underscore that 'LL analysis allows us to point out patterns representing different ways in which people, groups, associations, institutions and government agencies cope with the game of symbols within a complex reality' (p.27).

Tulp (1978) examined the languages of commercial billboards in Brussels. The purpose was to demonstrate how language usage patterns on these signs have been contributing to the city's Frenchification. He assumed that the visibility of a language in a public space is vital for its perceived ethnolinguistic vitality. Tulp focused on three large billboards in and around Brussels. The areas selected included major tram, metro, and bus routes. The findings show that French dominates the linguistic landscape.

3. Functions of Linguistic Landscapes

LL has 2 functions: informative and symbolic; informative function indicates the borders of

the territory of linguistic group. It shows that a specific language or languages for communication or to sell products. On the other hand, the symbolic function refers to the value and status of the languages as perceived by the members of a language group in comparison to other languages (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, Cenoz & Gorter, 2009, p.56).

Some state and regional authorities have included in their language policy rules about the languages to be used on signage. Regulations related to LL go side by side with a language policy for the use of languages in education, the media, social and economic life or other domains. The use of different languages in the sign also reflects the power, status and economic importance of the different languages. Cenoz & Gorter (2006) found that a relatively strong language policy in the case of Basque had a measurable effect on the LL as compared to Frisian where no such effect was found. In Botswana, there is no such regulation. One therefore sees such languages as English, Setswana and Chinese on the billboards, shops, restaurants in Gaborone.

The use of English around the world is a mark of globalization defined in economic terms of markets, production and consumption. By using English businesses aim at increasing their sales and thus its presence is motivated by economic reasons. The use of English also raises the issue of identity and power and thus can have consequences for the balance between the different languages in multilingual situations (Pennycook, 1993; Philipson, 2003). The omnipresence of English in LL is one of the most obvious markers of the process of globalization.

The basic premise of LL analysis is that visual language use in public spaces represents observable manifestations of circulating ideas about multilingualism (Shohamy, 2006, p.110). The LL constitutes the very scene made of streets, corners, circuses, parks, buildings where society's public life takes place. As such this carries crucial socio-symbolic importance as it actually identifies and thus serves as the emblem of societies, communities, and regions (Hult 2009, p.90).

To Hult (2009) the basic premise of LL analysis is that visual language use in the public spaces represents observable manifestations of circulating ideas about multilingualism (Shohamy 2006, p.110). For Ben-Rafael et al. 2006, p.8), the LL constitutes the very scene - made of streets, corners, circuses, parks, buildings – where society's public life takes place. This serves as the emblem of societies, communities, and regions.

The presence or absence of languages in public space communicates symbolic messages about the importance, power, significance and relevance of certain languages or the relevance of others (Shohamy 2006, p.110). In this way, circulating sociopolitical discourse about multilingualism is concretely observable.

LL analysis is concerned with how a specific public space is symbolically constructed “by a large variety of factors such as public institutions, associations, firms, individuals, that stem from most diverse strata and milieus” (Ban-Rafael 2006, p.8). It may be interesting to focus on what takes place behind the scenes in the construction of billboards.

4. Language Situation in Botswana:

Although when a nation clearly states its language policy, actual practice or implementation is another issue. Spolsky (2004) differentiates between policy and practice, namely beliefs (ideology), practice and management. He observes that “...the real language policy of a community is more likely to be found in its practices than in management” (p.222). Actual linguistic practices reveal the language ideology of the local people in light of national language policy. The LL thus provides an excellent means to study language ideology, how people themselves evaluate languages and multilingualism (Lanza & Woldemariam, 2009, p.194). This raises the issue of Botswana language policy and practice which are clearly reflected in the data collected; as discussed below.

4.1 Linguistic Landscape and Botswana Language Policy

The Report on the National Council on Education (NCE) (1993) considered the language question and decided “in favour of the introduction of the use of English as the medium of instruction from standard 1 by 2000”. It was later amended to: “English should be used as a medium of instruction from standard 2 by year 2002 (Basimodi, 2000, p. 145). Setswana should be taught as a compulsory subject through primary school.

In Botswana, as in many other sub-Saharan African countries, English, ex-colonial language has been allocated that role as the official language and the language of education. According to Nkosana (2011, p.129) “Proficiency in English expands one’s frontiers. First it as the official language it is the language of business in government and se-government institutions and also in private companies and non-governmental organizations”. Therefore proficiency in the language improves one’s prospects of getting employment in these institutions. Secondly, English being the language of education gives students who are proficient in it an advantage over those who are not. Lastly, those who are good in the language are respected as educated people and exercise a great deal of influence in the society compared to those who are not proficient in it (Bunyi, 2005).

Pennycook (1994) argues that because of the intricate involvement of English in the former British African countries including Botswana, in the political, educational, economical, and social lives of the countries, which in turn are also connected to the global political, educational, economical, and social life, it becomes difficult for Botswana to resist the growth and development of English in all spheres of life.

Pakir (1999) describes the importance of English as a global language as follows:

English is a global vehicle that refuels at every stop, creates economic and other opportunities, and returns to its home bases, each time upping the financial ante for English users. English has become a global commodity that seems to have no sell-by date attached to it (p.104).

Botswana, like small developing countries of Singapore and Brunei is in the process of establishing itself as an international Financial Service Centre in Southern Africa (Government of Botswana, 1997). This project cannot succeed without the use of English

as a medium of communication in business in Botswana. This possibly accounts for the dominance of English in the LL of Gaborone.

The use of different languages in the sign also reflects power, status and economic importance of the different languages in Botswana.

It has been observed that all around the world, signs which are multilingual tend to include English as one of the languages, not just in the capital cities but also provincial towns and villages (Schlick, 2003). In Botswana, the influx of Chinese brought about an additional language which is prominent in the LL of Gaborone.

Some of the causes of the spread of English are colonialism and globalization. Globalization is defined a process usually defined in economic terms of markets, production and consumption. By using English businesses aims at increasing their sales and thus its presence is motivated by economic reasons as in the case of foreign and local investors in Botswana.

The use of English also raises issues of identity and power and thus can have consequences for the balance between the different languages in multilingual situations (Pennycook, 1994; Fishman, 1996; Phillipson, 2003). For instance English spoken in Botswana and in many other parts of Africa has its own characteristics that identify the speakers with upper layers of the society. At the same time, the use of English is associated with values such as international orientation, modernity, success, sophistication or fun (Piller, 2001, 2003). This seems to explain the use of English that dominates signs on advertisements and billboards in businesses and public signs in Gaborone, Botswana.

5. Methodology

5.1 Data Collection Processes

Methodologically, LL analysis relies on photography and visual analysis. The core data gathering method is to engage in photography that thoroughly document defined social spaces. These include very specific geographical locations like train stations, and their immediate surroundings (Backhaus et al. 2006, Shohamy et al 2010), specific neighborhoods, (Huebner 20006), or a range of localities (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). The presence or absence of languages in public space communicates symbolic messages about the importance, power, significance, and relevance of certain languages or the irrelevance of others (Shohamy 2006, p.115). By interpreting quantitative data, researchers can begin to draw implications about societal issues related to the niches of specific languages, including ethnic/social conflicts and solidarity expressed through language choices, power dynamics of official or unofficial signage, and hidden agenda represented by disparities between language policies and realities of daily language use (Backhaus, 2006, Shohamy, 2006).

The data were collected in 2009 and 2010 in the Main Mall, Bus Rank/Station and Broadhurst Shopping Mall in Gaborone. This selection was based on my personal observations in order to demarcate these important areas of the city. Photographs of all tokens of environmental print found in the public domain including signs, names on buildings, advertisements, commercial shop signs and public signs on government buildings, three

hospitals (two private and one government) were collected with the assistant of a locally trained field assistant.

A total of 270 pictures of every visible signs were collected, and examined for languages displayed whether public or private, and the relative prominence of the languages displayed based on their placement on the signs. In other words, the LL items were gathered and classified according to the frequency of representation specific to languages in the public space and according to the visual presentation of languages in sign boards, polarized as top bottom (Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996). In addition, some interviews were carried out with randomly selected shop owners in order to investigate reasons concerning the choice of certain languages and linguistic items in the signs. The shop owners were asked about choices concerning the language used, the name given to the shop, and what type of clientele visited them.

In addition, I interviewed 20 shop/business owners in the designated area in Gaborone. In all cases the participants were Batswana and individuals who had emigrated to Botswana. Following Malinowski (2009, p.110), interviews were conducted in a narrative fashion and included business name, history, the significance of the business name, staff and clientele demographics, publicity practices, the nature of owner's involvement in creating their shop signs. A total of 20 hours of interviews were recorded in English. Of the 20 hours, only 10 hours of interviews were transcribed for analysis. The majority of interviews took place in the shops.

In conducting this LL research, the choice of sampling domain is driven by the purpose of the study – a selection of neighborhood to reflect diversity and variations of the communities described (Ban-Raphael, 2006). For instance, I focused on the language use patterns of shopping centres and bus stations in Gaborone. The signs issued by transport authority provide information necessary for safe and efficient journeys and to notify drivers of expected behavior.

5.2 Data Analysis

In the analysis, I checked for the presence or absence of specific languages, namely, English, Setswana and Chinese. The order of appearance provides niches of specific languages in Gaborone linguistic community. The tables below provide the findings.

5.3. Language Display and Language Distribution in Signs

Table 1. Overview of all lanaguages displyed in all of the signs

Languages	Number of signs	%
English only	175	61
Setswana only	25	9.0
English and Setswana	25	9.0
Chinese only	25	9.0
English and Chinese	20	8.0
Others	5	2.0
Total	270	100

The table indicates that English only constitutes the highest number of LL in Gaborone. It is followed by Setswana a National language, and Chinese a foreign language. In terms of occurrence of bilingual signs, English and Setswana are the highest while English and Chinese followed. There was no occurrence of Setswana and Chinese signs.

The areas under investigation are mainly shopping areas dominated by bottom-up contexts. However, the presence of some public signage (top-bottom) is evident and quite interesting with English the main language displayed and English and Setswana occasionally displayed.

5.4 Classification of Linguistic Language

Ben-Raphael e.al. (2006), Shohamy, E; Ben-Rafael; Bami, M. (2010) distinguish between the to-down and bottom-up signage. Top-down LL items include those issued by national and public bureaucracies and include public sites, public announcements and street names. Bottom-up items on the other hand include those issued by individuals' social actors such as shop owners and companies, including names of shops, business, signs and personal announcements. As pointed out above, the LL in Gaborone exhibits three main languages in monolingual and bilingual signs: English, Setswana, and Chinese. The use of English dominates all the signs collected.

Table2. Language distribution in signs according to top-down and bottom-up flows

Languages	Top-down	%	Bottom-up	%	Total %
English only	70	26	105	39	175 (65%)
Setswana only	12	4.4	18	7.0	26 (9.4%)
Chinese only	11	4.0	15	6.0	24 (9.0%)
English and Setswana	10	3.7	14	5.1	24 (9.0%)
English and Chinese	5	1.0	15	6.0	20 (7.4%)

Being mostly shopping areas investigated, a bottom-up context dominated the signs. Nonetheless, there is some evident of public language display (top-bottom) and with English the main language displayed e.g. warnings such as HOW ABOUT NONE FOR THE ROAD, SAFE DRIVING. There are few in Setswana and in Chinese only. There are those that are bilingual and they include bottom-up signs such as displayed in private hospitals; around Businesses in Chinese designated Malls in Broadhurst area of Gaborone. The monolingual/bilingual signs displayed by the public are: warnings against HIV/AIDS, safe driving at the Bus station in Gaborone.

Landry & Bourhis, (1997) state that ...”absence of the in-group language from the linguistic landscape can lead to group members devaluing the strength of their own language community; weaken their resolve to transmit the language to the next generation, and sap their collective will to survive as a distinct language group” (p.143). Setswana as in in-group language seems absent in the linguistic landscape of Gaborone. However, the language dominates interactions in offices, shops and the streets, while English that dominates the LL are scarcely spoken in these public domains except when it is obvious that interactants were bilinguals or multilinguals in English and other languages.

Table 3. Distribution of languages in monolingual signs

Languages	<u>Number of signs</u>				Total	%
	Private		Public			
	(n=220)					
English only	110	(50%)	30	(25%)	140	75
Setswana only	18	(7.2%)	12	(5.5%)	30	12,7
Chinese only	15	(8,0%)	10	(4.5%)	35	12.5
Total	133	(65%)	87	(35%)	220	100

The findings indicate that LL in Gaborone is dominated by the bilingual signs of English and Setswana followed closely by Chinese and English. The English and Setswana LL are dominated by public signs and others by private signs. On the other hand Chinese and English is dominated by private signs.

Table 4. Distribution of signs in bilingual signs

Languages	<u>Number of signs</u>				Total	%
	Public		Private			
English and Setswana	15	(30%)	10	(20%)	25	50
English and Chinese	5	(10%)	15	(30)	20	40
Others	2	(4%)	3	(6%)	5	10
Total	22	(44%)	28	(56%)	50	100

Placement of languages in the bilingual signs shows that top-down dominates bottom-up and English and Setswana are more prominent over English and Setswana. This finding can be explained in terms of the fact that there are more English/Setswana bilinguals than English/Chinese speakers.

Table 5. Placement of languages in bilingual signs

Top		%	Bottom		%
English and Setswana	15	30	English	10	20
English and Chinese	5	10	Setswana	15	30
Others	2	4	Others	3	6
Total	22	44%		28	56%

It should be noted that of the three hospitals Bokamoso Private Hospital LL is fully bilingual in English and Setswana followed by Gaborone Private Hospital. The only public hospital (Princess Marina) is partially bilingual. In all the three hospitals, English comes first followed by Setswana in order of placement. The placement of the languages seems to be suggestive of the nations bilingual policy which recognizes English as the official language and Setswana as the national language.

6. Discussion of Findings

Landry and Bourhis (1997) distinguished between the informative and symbolic functions of language signs. The signs of Gaborone shows that a specific language (English) or languages

(Setswana and Chinese) are available for communication, e.g. to sell products. On the other hand the symbolic function refers to the value and status of the languages as perceived by members of a language group in comparison to other languages. Landry and Bourhis are of the view that LL can be an important factor in language policy and in economic processes (Cenoz & Gorter, 2009). The LL in Gaborone reflects Botswana bilingual language policy and the economic processes that brought about the influx of Chinese and its attendant use of Chinese language for its clientele.

Some state and regional authorities have included in their language policy rules about the languages to be used on signage. It appears that this is not the case with Botswana. Regulations related to LL go side by side with a language policy for use in education, media, social and economic life of other domains.

The use of different signs in Botswana can be of great symbolic significance. Governmental language policy is usually directed mainly at official signs and thus is bound to have socio-economic and political consequences e.g HIV/AIDS warnings in Botswana is in English and Setswana,

In an interview with some shop owners, it was asserted repeatedly that the use of English language in signs was considered to be functional to attract customers since most Gaborone residents that patronize shops understand English. The use of Chinese is targeted towards a few Chinese immigrants who do not understand English or Setswana. The naming of the shops in Chinese, Setswana and to some extent English was for economic purposes to attract potential customers.

The omnipresence of English in LLs is one of the most obvious markets of the process of globalization. Many studies of LL have provided evidence for this. For example, Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) observed this phenomenon in their study conducted in Israel. They found that between 25 and 75 percent of the items analyzed in their study were English, depending on the specific area. In Thailand, it is obligatory by law to use at least Thai, still English is prominent on many signs (Huebner, 2006). Cenoz & Gorter (2006) also observe similar patterns of the use of English in LL in some cities in Spain. The question is: *is English as a means of communication or an index of globalization?* The answer to this question is that English is more of an index of globalization than a means of communication. This is so because only a small fraction of the population speaks English in official contexts and in business sectors. The signs in Gaborone do not appear to reflect the reality of language use in Gaborone.

When studying the LL in Gaborone, I observe other economic factors such as immigration and tourism which have influenced the development of multilingualism and multiculturalism in Botswana. The LLs studied in Gaborone reflect somehow cultural and linguistic diversity (Chinese). The language signs thus points to the indicator of the languages used in specific settings.

7. Conclusion

This study of linguistic landscape of Gaborone has shown that the city is moving towards multilingualism in English, Setswana and Chinese. This is a result of economic activities and globalization. The study shows that English dominates the landscape as it is in the case of other Anglo African countries today. It does not suggest that the nation speak English more than the local language, Setswana. The study also suggests the influx of Chinese language and culture. What is absent in this study is that there was no single sign that was in any other local language apart from Setswana. This is understandable in that the nation does not assign any status to the existing minority languages. Future research should focus on other cities of Botswana to see if similar picture like Gaborone will emerge.

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