

# Linguistic Landscape: Investigation of Linguistic Representations of Cape Town

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## Abstract

Linguistic Landscape (LL) refers to language use on objects in public space. An analysis of LL can uncover social realities and inter-group dynamics that are not readily apparent. The purpose of this study is to review the pertinent literature and to describe the LL of a limited area of Cape Town in terms of 1) Language represented in public space (street signs, commercial signs, and public notices), 2) Source of language selection (Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up), and 3) Type of sign (street, commercial, public notice). The use of English was found to be disproportionately dominant, and multilingualism underrepresented. Implications of this study point to the importance of LL analysis in order to obtain a clear picture of de facto realities of different linguistic communities within a single space.

**Keywords:** Linguistic landscape, Social realities, Linguistic communities, Language

## 1. Introduction

“Linguistic Landscape (LL) refers to linguistic objects that mark the public space.” (Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara, & Trumper-Hecht, 2004). Linguistic objects include symbols or signs that communicate specific information or serve a specific function in public space. These objects, although used to communicate geographical information, as in the case of signage, such as location names, directions, and names of establishments, communicate more about the society than first suspected. As Ben Rafael et al. put it, inspection of LL can serve as “... an interesting way of uncovering social realities.”

Landry and Bourhis (1997) postulate that LL holds two separate functions: informational and symbolic. The Informational function of LL refers to the markings of space with the purpose of communicating specific information, while the symbolic function communicates the complex “social realities” of people that inhabit that same space. The use of specific languages communicates more than the information found on the sign. It states that those who identify with the represented language are present and/or welcome in that space, and can expect to be able to obtain information and/or services in that language. Unilingual societies are a rarity today; more often than not countries or nations are a melting pot of numerous different nationalities, identities, cultures, roots, and languages.

In many countries, there are at the very least two linguistically distinct groups that share space and power within a single region, claiming rights to that space in terms of numbers and/or history. It is in this present situation that the LL becomes increasingly important. It becomes a tool of inclusion or exclusion, of alienation or welcome, and of claim or loss over area. When there is a discrepancy between LL representation in public space and the presence of a linguistic community, an underlying social message can be (mis)interpreted. As Landry and Bourhis (1997) state “such discrepancies are most likely to occur in bilingual environments in which the relative status and functions of competing languages are unstable.” They note that, in multilingual societies, where there is a disproportionate predominance of one language over others in the regions’ LL, there is a message of power and status of one group over the other that is communicated in public space.

Several studies around the world have been performed in order to examine different aspects of LL representations and their implied meanings, as well as their effect on the public. Hicks (2002) examined the realities of Scotland’s LL and LP as they relate to Gaelic signage. He found that there was a lack of a consistent policy relating to Gaelic signage arrangement in Scotland’s LL as well as little knowledge of correct Gaelic forms. In this case, the lack of knowledge or interest in a specific language and its community is conveyed in its exclusion in the public space.

Landry and Bourhis (1997) empirically investigated the area of Quebec, its LL and the effects of its display on the public. They found that signage in LL holds much more power than recognized; they argue that it can actually influence the language behavior. In more specific terms, they state that the relative presence or absence of signage in a target language influences the degree of its usage in private domains of speakers’ lives. That is to say, in case of the absence of signage in a particular language there is a negative effect on its speakers

toward that language, causing them to use the language less at home and have weaker feelings of desire to pass on the language to future generations, therefore contributing overall to the loss of that language.

Backhaus (2006) empirically investigated the LL of Tokyo, the official and nonofficial signs, and the underlying motivations of power and solidarity communicated through them. In a city found within the borders of a country that “has for a long time been known as one of the prototypes of a monolingual society,” Backhaus has observed some positive changes regarding the representation of minorities. Although prevalence of Japanese in the official signage is still overwhelming and related to power, as interpreted by Backhaus, “...official agents have started providing for signs in English and, to a certain degree, Chinese and Korean. These signs are unequivocal as to the role of Japanese as the language of power, though it should be mentioned that mere existence of official signs containing languages other than Japanese constitutes a noteworthy concession to linguistic minorities in Tokyo.” In the sphere of nonofficial signage, a much more diversity was observed, and this diversity is attributed to the underlying motivation of solidarity, rather than of power. Agents involved in defining Tokyo’s LL in this case, “communicate solidarity with things non-Japanese” (p.52).

Daily, Giles, & Jansma (2004) set out to determine, among other things “if there was any direct relationship between our (California’s) teenagers’ perceptions of the ethno-linguistic make-up of their LL and their language attitudes” (p.27) They compared the attitudes of Anglos and Hispanics towards each other juxtaposed against their LL representation. Although they found no correlation between Anglos’ attitudes toward Hispanics regardless of the LL environment, possibly due to the Anglos’ more dominant status, they did find an effect on Hispanics’ attitudes toward Anglos in different LL environments. In more Spanish oriented LL, less positive attitudes were reported toward the Anglos. On the other hand, in more English oriented LL areas, the Hispanics’ attitude toward the Anglos was more positive. This study’s findings touch on yet another important issue in LL importance. According to this study, the exposure and representation in the environment can diminish negative attitudes toward the ‘other’ group. This may be a helpful tool in reducing prejudices between groups sharing a common space. The mere-exposure effect in psychology refers to the phenomenon of preference for or a more positive response to a stimulus which one develops through mere or increased exposure (Zajonc, 1968).

The importance of fair LL planning is supported by the findings of Padilla et al. (1991), which state that in the US, a disparity in recognition of minority languages, or specifically non-English languages, has a negative effect on those with limited English proficiency – on their psychological development, intergroup relations, and their academic success.

Language embodies roots, identity, and culture of the people and therefore has strong implications on their social identity. Miller (2000) explains that it is essential to accept that identities and language are inseparable and that therefore “...the question of which language is in use is an important one in the identity stakes” (p. 74). If this is so, one can easily understand the importance and relevance of LL planning and its effect on the public. Barker

et al. (2001) explain this clearly: “The way that social identity is communicated and constructed through every day practices within social institutions (e.g. workplace and school), through the mass media, and in the LL of a community, influences how linguistic groups view themselves, each other, and their respective socioeconomic *vitality*. This in turn, affects the ways in which language groups behave toward each other” From this point of view, LL planning can and does serve as a tool for social perception planning. Different linguistic representations of different language communities can affect the social relationships between the groups, their perceptions, and their tolerance and acknowledgements of each other. Although, the salience of LL design’s importance in shaping social and political climates of the area most often goes unperceived, from the findings of the studies mentioned above, it is clear that more attention should be paid to such issues.

Through the literature review above we learn that LL can shed light on the not so apparent social reality (Ben Rafael et al., 2004; Landry & Bourhis 1997) of people occupying the same space and time. It can reveal the lack of knowledge (Hicks 2002), communicate solidarity (Backhaus, 2006), and contribute to attrition of a language (Landry & Bourhis 1997), as well as improve intergroup attitudes and relationships (Daily, et al., 2005; Padilla, et al. 1991, Zajonc, 1968). With the weight of power held in the LL as described above we argue that it is imperative to examine the underlying messages communicated in LL in all communities. In the present study we examine a limited area of Cape Town, a single region within South Africa – a country which in 1990’s experienced a major shift in political standing and orientation. In 1995, apartheid was abolished and the political power shifted into the hands of the racial majority of the country. The purpose of this study is to uncover and describe the LL realities of a single limited region within a larger framework.

## **2. Methods**

In order to investigate the LL of Cape Town, we concentrated on the urban, city center of Cape Town and the neighborhood of Newlands. This case study was inspired and in part modeled after the Ben-Rafael et al. (2004) study in Israel. Data were collected in the form of photographs and notes, and were marked for: 1) Language represented: English, English and other, and Other, 2) Source of signage: Top-Down or Bottom-Up. Where Top-Down classification refers to the signs posted by national or local government agencies and Bottom-Up refers to the signs posted by private shop owners and private businesses, and 3) Type of signs: street signs, commercial signs, and public notices. The street signs include all signage containing information on direction and names of places. The commercial signs include the store and business signage and the public office signage. The public notices group includes any signs used to communicate specific information to the public on a more temporary basis, and excludes the signs that fall in the two previously mentioned categories.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

A total of 98 signs were recorded and coded for a) Language: English, English and other, and Other b) Source of signage: Top-Down/Bottom-Up and, c) Type of signage: street, commercial, and public notices as described above.

Out of 98 signs collected, 53 signs came from the Top-Down source, while 45 signs came from the Bottom-Up source. We collected 30 street signs, 54 commercial signs, and 14 public notices as shown in the Table 1. Out of 98 total signs collected, five signs were found to include a language other than English. That is, 5% of the signs collected included a language that was not English. Three of those five signs were found to fit into the ‘English and Other language category, which means that a language other than English was represented along with English and not by itself. Two signs belonged to the Top-Down source and three signs belong to the Bottom-Up source, as described below:

A) Top-Down commercial sign was presented in three languages: English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa, and interestingly enough the sign itself was intended to communicate an establishment that promotes the unity within Cape Town. The sign reads “Western Cape – Home for All.”

B) The Top-Down public notice sign was found at a construction site and out of four signs, counted as a single exhibit due to the placement of signs together as a whole, one of the four signs contains a language other than English.

C) The Bottom-Up commercial signs that displayed languages other than English are in the form of store names. Two of them are in Afrikaans - “Rosenwerth” and “Wijnhuis,” and one of them is in French “L’Orangerie.”

Table 1. Signage

	Street Signs	Commercial Signs	Public Notices
Top-Down	N=30	N=10	N=13
Bottom-Up	N=0	N=44	N=1

B)



In this small-scale case study of the LL of limited area of Cape Town, it is evident that change in South Africa has not yet reached the level of LL in this area of the country. The lack of representation of the majority black African linguistic groups and the prevalence of English in the LL of Cape Town is observed.

The stability and prevalence of English language use in presently examined LL may be viewed in three ways: 1) LL may be communicating a reality that is different than the official political changes that have taken place in South Africa, 2) The majority black South Africans may be more tolerant to “others” language as compared to the colonial rulers of the past, and 3) The global status of the English language as the lingua-franca may be given precedence over the ideological representations on the grounds of economics. Being a tourist destination, the importance of the use of English may be regarded as tourist friendly and therefore beneficial to the economy.

Whichever the case, LL examination of a single and limited area of South Africa has provided us with a look inside, which is separate from the official policy and political change that has taken place, and is found to be contrary to the notion of rule of majority in a given population and its geography. Suggestions for further research would include a look into different areas of South Africa in order to build a whole picture of the LL of the country as well as to shed light on the direction of the country as a whole in terms of the social realities of different groups, intergroup relationships such as the amount of knowledge and exposure of different groups to each other, and its’ effect on inter-group attitudes, solidarity, social reality, and language attrition/stability, among others. Studies such as this one, conducted on a larger scale, could provide administrators with important information on ways to positively affect social change and attitudes within different groups through space semiotics – the “...communicative function of space (Hall, 1968).”

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