

EXPLORING VIRTUAL LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES

The linguistic landscape (LL) and its on-line homologue, the virtual linguistic landscape (VLL) or “linguistic cyberscape” (Ivkovic, 2007), have recently begun to draw a great deal of attention from researchers in sociolinguistics and a number of other disciplines. As is the case for many other concepts and areas of inquiry, there is no single way to define a LL; likewise, there are numerous methodological approaches that can be adopted for the purposes of data collection and analysis. This report provides a brief overview of the concept of the LL; then, the VLL is explored as an environment with great pedagogical potential for the development of sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and sociopragmatic competence.

The core of the LL as a construct consists of language that is displayed and used in the public sphere. Early studies, for example, focused primarily on signage, including both words and other symbols used for communicative purposes. “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” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, 25). Backhaus (2005) notes that empirical studies have often been undertaken in areas where language contact was the source of linguistic conflict. In particular, the situations in Quebec and in Belgium have been the focus of empirical studies by both language planners (Monnier 1989; Conseil de la Langue Française 2000) and linguists (Tulp 1978; Wenzel 1996; see Landry and Bourhis [1997] for more references) (p. 104). Depending on the purpose of the study, it is possible to compare a single LL over time (a diachronic perspective) or two or more LLs during the same period. Given the vast amount of language use in different contexts of the public sphere throughout the (Francophone) world, the possibilities indeed seem endless.

Over the past few decades, the scope of analyses of the LL has been expanded in order to distinguish language in the public space produced by private citizens vs. language produced or imposed by governments and corporations. Moreover, Shohamy and Gorter (2009) note that the LL “is a broader concept than documentation of signs; it incorporates multimodal theories to include also sounds, images, and graffiti” (4) and that the study of a LL can be applied to “education, learning, critical thinking and political activism” (4).

One possible framework, outlined by

Huebner (2009), for analyzing a LL involves the use of Hymes’ (1972) model of communication and the SPEAKING mnemonic: Setting (or scene); Participants; Ends (or goals); Act sequences; Key, Instrumentalities; Norms; and Genre. Another framework, offered by Cenoz and Gorter (2009), proposes an analysis from an economic perspective. In this type of study, linguistic diversity can be viewed as analogous to biodiversity, and the goal is to identify and interpret value placed on various languages that exist within a common LL. This framework is based on research by Grin (1990, 1996, 2007), who “mentions as key issues of the field, the benefits and costs of intergroup communication, differences in participation on the labor market, inequality based on language, the provision of language-specific goods, language use in the marketplace, the role of language in economic development and the economic advantages and disadvantages of different policies for language-teaching” (Huebner, p. 58). It is also possible, as demonstrated by Ben-Rafael (2009), to take a sociological approach for investigating a LL. From this perspective, it is important to consider, among other things, how individual, corporate, and public actors or figures present themselves and shape their identities in public spaces. It is then often possible, by extension, to understand relations of power. “The more the power-relations principle plays a role in [LL] structuration, the more this aspect might be the object of confrontations, which would only confirm Bourdieu’s (1983, 1993) view of social reality as interconnected fields structured by power differentiation... and wars of words” (47). The methodological issues, concepts, and theoretical approaches mentioned above are only a sample of those that can be used for exploring LLs.

The next logical step is to extend the LL to cyberspace, where VLLs have one or more dimensions that reflect some characteristics of physical spaces and some that are unique to online communication environments. Ivkovic and Lotherington (2009) explain that the “LL is immersive: the individual enters and exits, functions, and may even reside within the physical territory, interacting linguistically within demarcated spatial boundaries, whereas the VLL is delocalised: anyone can enter and engage within virtual space from anywhere as, for instance, in [Second Life]. So a salient difference between the virtual and physical LL relates to stability and transience” (19).

Another difference involves the ways in which languages co-exist. In physical spaces

(public signage, interactions among the public and shopkeepers or service industry employees), multiple languages can be used simultaneously; however, in cyberspace, languages can be compartmentalized, especially in the case of Web sites. Readers of the on-line version of *Le Monde* or *Berliner Zeitung*, for example, know that they need to be able to read French or German, respectively, since these newspapers have specific audiences and publish information in only one language. However, a news organization such as *Agence France-Presse* with a global brand and presence offers its Web-based content in Arabic, English, French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Ivkovic and Lotherington (2009) found similar differences between the Web sites of the governments of Germany and Russia. In the case of German’s site, content was available in German, English, and French. The content in German was clearly geared toward German citizens (with a message from Chancellor Merkel about better working conditions), yet the content on the English- and French-language pages addressed non-Germans who might want to know about the benefits of globalization for everyone (presumably all over the world). Ivkovic and Lotherington label this type of approach as an informational function since “[t]he Web site is created on pragmatic rather than political principles: the German language site targets primarily German citizens and has a richer menu, leading to a variety of links and more detailed information” (30). Conversely, the Russian government’s site provided almost all content only in Russian. It is clear that potential non-Russian visitors have not been considered or have been ignored. According to Ivkovic and Lotherington, “[a]n implicit message has also been sent: Russian is a major language and should be learned widely; therefore, there is no need for an alternative language in the Web presentation. Another message can be inferred: through its language policy, Russian is intent on resisting the hegemony of the English language” (31). In the case of the Russian government’s site, the noticeable absence of other major languages can be considered a symbolic function of language. Such an approach “is less responsive to the context of the communicative act and implicitly, deliberately or unintentionally, sends a socio-political message involving the place of Russian on the world stage” (32).

Analyzing a linguistic cyberscape in such a way can prove to be difficult since it is necessary to determine—or at least guess—

which languages should be or do not need to be available. Nonetheless, using Ivkovic and Lothierington's (2009) methodology would be a good starting point for analyzing a VLL since the analysis is based on a comparison of two sites that have the potential to be almost identical. At a minimum, most governments with a Web presence use their space to provide practical information to citizens. Whether or not they provide information for non-residents is something that may not be obvious; however, an analysis of this feature of a VLL can offer students opportunities to engage in critical and imaginative thinking instead of limiting the scope of the task to reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

Another dimension of the analysis of a (physical or virtual) LL can involve identifying instances of language play, variation, and borrowing. One example with these features is the site of the *SNCF*. Proper nouns are usually quite easy for students to spot, especially technology-related terms that happen to come from English or American corporations. Visitors to the welcome page of the *SNCF* currently see, for example, *iPhone* and *AppStore*. This is not too surprising since the iPhone has been available in Europe for some time, so it is easy to guess that there is now an iPhone application for *SNCF* travelers (called *SNCFDirect*). The proper nouns *iPhone* and *AppStore* happen to be the only English terms used on the French-language welcome page, but the notions of language contact and the coexistence of multiple languages become somewhat more interesting when the visitor to this site clicks on the British flag icon (for the English-language version of the site) or the German flag icon (for the German-language version of the site). For each non-French version of the welcome page, the top third of the page appears in the language selected; however, the mini-windows on the bottom two thirds of the page (except for the zones *SNCT Services* and *Buy Tickets*) are only partially translated. Each of these mini-windows has a heading or theme at the top and an explanation in the rest of the mini-window, but only the heading or theme is translated. This reinforces the complexities involved in editing, publishing, and viewing hypertext, and this also demonstrates that an analysis of the *SNCF*'s approach to language use might be somewhere between an informational function and a symbolic function. It is not apparent why some content is only partially translated, but an attempt was obviously made to accommodate English- and German-speaking travelers. Curiously, the Latest Press Release mini-window on the English-language site only provides the latest press release in French. It is doubtful that the partial translation is some kind of

political statement on the part of the *SNCF*. Instead, it seems clear that analyses of VLLs will require careful consideration of technological and budgetary limitations (for the translation of all content in all available languages).

On a more global level of the organization of the site, it may take students some time to discover that the *SNCF* welcome page itself has no area for consulting schedules or purchasing tickets. However, anyone who visited this site in the late 1990s might recall that the initial welcome page of the *SNCF* site was indeed designed so that passengers could consult timetables and view travel-related information. Currently, it is necessary to move from the welcome page to the *Voyages-SNCF* mini-site in order to do so. Although it would be impossible for students to undertake a diachronic (different points in time) analysis of the *SNCF* site without access to its archives, teachers interested in a diachronic analysis for this site or any other could take screen captures of sites on a weekly, monthly, or annual basis for future use.

A close examination of curious lexical items as examples of language play and variation can always add a fascinating dimension to the analysis of any (physical or virtual) LL. Visitors to the *Voyages-SNCF* page of the *SNCF* site will notice the term *S'Miles* in the *Fidélité* areas of the page and elsewhere. This blended term from English (*smile* + *miles*) would probably not confuse many speakers of French since *smiley* is already a widely used English borrowing (with positive connotations) referring to a smiling face emoticon in text-based computer-mediated communication, and even though *miles* is not a cultural construct used regularly in (continental) Europe, the term *S'Miles* is contextualized on the Web page within the *Fidélité* category (*Gagnez des S'Miles; Convertissez vos S'Miles en billet de train; Conditions programme S'Miles*). Although the term itself and its use(s) are quite noticeable, a sociolinguistic analysis of this item must go beyond identifying *S'Miles* simply as a blended borrowing from English. In order to understand this aspect of the VLL, it is important to explore opinions about and reactions to the use of this curious term, which happens to be the subject of an opinion given by the *Commission générale de terminologie et de néologie (Ministère de la culture et de la communication, France)*: "Le mot *s'miles* (nom déposé), créé en français à partir d'un jeu de mots sur des termes anglais, est fréquemment employé dans le domaine commercial pour désigner des points attribués aux clients, en fonction du montant de leurs achats, par certaines chaînes de distribution. Ces points permettent de bénéficier de réductions et

d'obtenir des cadeaux. La Commission générale de terminologie et de néologie recommande de préférer à ce faux anglicisme le terme *point de fidélité* [bold in original], compris de tous et implanté depuis longtemps dans l'usage" (*Journal officiel de la République française*, n°294 du 18 décembre 2005, p. 19501, texte n° 34). More than a year later, the term *S'Miles* (and another English borrowing) received rather harsh criticism in a report to France's *Assemblée nationale* on the situation of the language française dans le monde: "L'influence de l'anglais ne cesse de croître depuis une cinquantaine d'années du fait de la mondialisation de l'économie. Des pans entiers d'activités sont régis par la langue de Shakespeare (ou du moins, ce qu'il en reste), comme les secteurs de l'informatique, des télécommunications ou encore de l'aviation civile. La place prise par l'anglais concurrence la langue française sur notre propre territoire, à travers les médias ou du fait des pratiques commerciales de sociétés nationales, la plupart du temps en violation de la loi Toubon de 1994. Aussi paradoxal que cela puisse paraître, une entreprise publique comme la *SNCF*, partenaire officiel du festival des «francoffonies», a baptisé son programme de fidélité «*S'miles*». De même, depuis son rapprochement avec KLM, Air France a remplacé son programme «Fréquence Plus» par «*Flying Blue*». De telles pratiques sont inadmissibles [bold in original]" (*Assemblée nationale de la République française, Commission des affaires étrangères, Rapport d'information* n° 3693).

A brief analysis of a single term as part of a VLL demonstrates to what extent language and society (i.e., social dimensions of life, people, policies) interact and can have an impact on each other. In addition to *S'Miles*, the *SNCF* Web site contains many other expressions and terms representing language play and variation that deserve analysis within a (V)LL framework: *le calendrier le plus hotte de l'hiver; Carte 12-25: la marre story; Citylien; e-vitrine; e-postulez; Francilien; gares; le grand lifting; génération écomobile; iDTGV; iDNight; iDZap; iDZen; iDZinc; Navigo; RER; Regliss; sncf.mobi; TERMoblie; widget*. Which of these terms might be easily understood by frequent train travelers? Which ones might be more easily understood by younger generations? Which ones are based on English? Are any other foreign languages present on the *SNCF* Web site? Are these terms and expressions that people use, or have they been created by the marketing division of the *SNCF* in order to promote new products and services? Who owns the *SNCF*? Who uses trains for what purposes? These are only some of the questions that

should be asked, even if they cannot all be answered quickly or in a simple way.

It might help students to reverse the situation and explore ways in which French and other foreign languages are incorporated into marketing campaigns, corporate slogans, and everyday life in the U.S. Why do certain languages seem to have greater value? In which contexts are specific languages more or less desirable? Who learns which languages (in the U.S. and/or in France)? Regardless of the questions that are asked, it is important to remember that the goal of the analysis of any (V)LL is to go beyond reading comprehension and the acquisition of vocabulary and syntax in order to explore social dimensions of language.

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