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Linguistic Landscape in the City

Edited by
Elana Shohamy, Eliezer Ben-Rafael
and Monica Barni

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Chapter 14

Responses to the Linguistic Landscape in Memphis, Tennessee: An Urban Space in Transition

REBECCA TODD GARVIN

This chapter focuses on individual cognitive and emotional responses to the linguistic landscape (LL) in urban communities of Memphis, Tennessee. With a population of approximately 650,000, Memphis is the eighteenth largest city in the USA, located in the mid-south region, and is an urban space in transition due to heavy flows of transnational migration to the area. A phenomenon so recent that it is not currently reflected in official census reports, this international migration trend is manifested by shifts in public language use that are visible and salient in the LL throughout the city. With interviews conducted onsite during 'walking tours' of specifically chosen areas, this qualitative study explored self-reported understandings and visual perceptions of public signage – the multiple languages, images and icons marking multilingual urban communities.

Introduction

Descriptions of the scope and phenomenon of language behavior and linguistic interactions in urban contexts are not possible to accomplish fully without a workable frame of reference (Goffman, 1963). Such framing provides a focus for research and a manageable space for linguistic exploration. Barton and Hamilton (2005) maintained that we live in a textually mediated world elucidated and framed by literacy events that are situated, enacted and understood in specific contexts. Referring to these mediational texts or signs as they are physically placed in the world, Scollon and Scollon (2003: introduction, p. x) wrote: 'Everywhere about us in our day-to-day world we see the discourses which shape, manage, entice, and control our actions'. Studies of signs in public spaces have been documented since the 1960s (see chart in Backhaus, 2007: 56), but it was not until a study to investigate perceptions of ethnic group vitality based on the presence or absence of minority languages on public signage in Canada by Landry and Bourhis (1997) that the LL was framed as the study of concrete languages on signs and billboards in public places. Since then, a growing number of

applied linguists and language scholars have creatively and systematically applied this approach to the study of multilingualism in areas throughout the world. With growing enthusiasm, brought about by a richness of data in terms of sociolinguistic information embedded in the LL, linguistic landscape scholars, in a mode of critical reflexivity, are now questioning the boundaries of the frame and coalescing to articulate the field and scope of LL studies, with particular focus on the multilingual urban landscape.

According to Coulmas (2009), written language coincided with the development of urbanization laying the foundation for the conception and management of the public sphere – public signs, marking and defining centers of human habitation, have been around for a long time. He stated that urban landscapes should logically be the focus of LL study. In *Linguistic Landscape: Expanding the Scenery*, editors Shohamy and Gorter (2009) opened a dialogue to expand the focus of the LL beyond concrete language inscriptions to include icons and images and other multimodal literacies present in the public sphere. This work grounded the emerging field of LL study with theories based on language choice (Spolsky, 2009), sociological approach (Ben-Rafael, 2009), economic approach (Cenoz & Gorter, 2009), genre theory with varied norms of interpretation (Huebner, 2009) and ecological orientation (Hult, 2009). Nonetheless, Huebner (2009: 70) maintained that for him, there are still 'problems of selection, classification, and linguistic analyses of artifacts found in the LLs' as well as the ways a variety of readers are observing LL items.

Since 1997, according to Gorter and Cenoz (2008: 343) the majority of LL studies have focused primarily on the 'description and analysis of written information' in the LL. Increasingly, researchers (e.g. Ben-Rafael, 2009; Cenoz & Gorter, 2009; Gorter, 2006, 2009; Huebner, 2009; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009; Spolsky, 2009) are calling for interpretations of the LL that take into account not only the intended meanings of the sign makers, but also the psychological and visual perceptions of the sign readers. Spolsky (2009: 33), for example, alluded to the risks of misinterpretation about the status of language activity and a tendency toward 'organized language management' when the sign-maker is out of touch with the sign-reader. In *Reading shop windows in globalized neighborhoods*, Collins and Slembrouck (2007: 335) noted 'how they [public signs] are read [by passersby] is a question rarely addressed'. In a recent study with school children in Canada, Dagenais *et al.* (2009) posited that relatively few studies have been conducted to examine ways in which individuals interact with the LL text. To promote language awareness in children, Dagenais *et al.* (2009: 256–257) argued that the 'LL serves as a research tool to stimulate children's observations of texts, multilingualism and language diversity'. Not enough is known about the ways individuals interact with the LL or

its role in the negotiation of thoughts, feelings, actions and identity formations.

This chapter presents a new methodology designed to investigate the cognitive and emotional verbal responses elicited and triggered by close physical proximity and explicit reference to the LL. Utilizing postmodern interviewing methodology (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003), this dissertation study (Garvin, 2010) explored self-reported understandings of the LL and the psychological, emotional impact of *migrant cityscaping*, the act of signing the urban LL to reflect the needs and identities of migrant populations (Garvin & Hanauer, 2007). The questions posed are: In what ways do individual residents understand, interpret and interact with the LL in their communities? What are their thoughts and feelings about multilingualism or changes in the LL? In what ways does the LL connect residents to their social and psychological identities? By addressing issues of readership of the LL in urban spaces in transition, the researcher attempted to address a gap in LL research and accept Malinowski's (2009: 124) challenge to LL scholars 'to situate and contextualize our studies in the lives of those who read, write, and conduct their lives amongst the signs of our field'. The theoretical framework for this qualitative ethnographic study can be described as a critical postmodern interview inquiry with a LL approach. Starting with a discussion of methodology aspects such as the use of the LL as both text and tool, the 'walking tour' interview, the site, and participants, the remainder of this chapter will present the results and conclusions drawn that demonstrate the psychological and emotional impact of migrant cityscaping on the participants as they interacted with and responded to the LL in their communities.

The Linguistic Landscape as Text and Tool

Like a snapshot of one moment in time, the LL presents a concrete text of actual language use in a particular time and place. It is a text created and bounded by geography and human habitation in a particular location. In urban communities, the LL reflects the complex patterns of communicative life in an urban space and indexes language practices, ethnic cultures, values and the history of a community. Perhaps in this way, the gestalt of the LL text (Ben-Rafael, 2009) is holistically experienced as it embodies situated linguistic practices, in particular, the phenomenon of language contact, choice and change often constrained by local ideologies, practices and government language policy (Spolsky, 2009). Hanauer (2009: 13) stated 'the beauty of the linguistic landscape is that it is a living entity that evolves and reflects the "here and now" of discursive positioning and the power relations within a social arena'. As such, the urban LL text is not fixed. It is dynamic and multilayered, constantly changing to represent the values, needs,

resources, institutions, restrictions, contestations, cultures, languages and dreams of its multiple authors who are positioned and actively positioning themselves within a geographical space.

In addition to providing an authentic text of actual situated language use (Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Gee, 2005), the LL has potential as a powerful research tool in its function as a *stimulus text* during interviews. In qualitative interviewing, researchers often employ techniques to encourage participants to talk, techniques that include use of stimulus texts. Pavlenko (2003) conducted a study to examine second language influence on Russian first language speakers using films as stimuli to elicit narratives. In *Emotions and Multilingualism*, Pavlenko (2005) presented a list of cross-linguistic decoding studies that used recordings as stimuli. In other instances, interviewees have been asked to interpret pictures, to draw, to write stories, to complete sentences, to respond with one word 'free' associations and to watch movies. This is not new. However, Törrönen (2002) stated that research needs to explore and include more discussion on how these texts are internalized and the ways they are used during the interview. Functioning as externalized reference points, in a study on alcohol use in Finland, Törrönen (2002) maintained that stimulus texts can be used as clues (references), as microcosms (symbols of groups or cognitive associations) or as provokers (emotional triggers) in the production and analysis of interview texts. As explained above, the LL in the current study functioned as both text and tool in that it embodied the phenomenon under investigation as well as stimulated and focused the interviews that were conducted onsite during the 'walking tours'.

'Walking Tour' Methodology

Embracing postmodern interviewing sensibilities, a 'walking tour' methodology was designed to investigate the dynamic processes of interaction and the co-construction of knowledge mediated and stimulated by the LL. With long-standing and migrant residents of Memphis, the researcher explored the ways the LL text focused and stimulated the conversation during the interview while mediating a sense of place and space. The LL reflects the communicative life in an urban space. Through systematic observation of the LL during 'walking tour' interviews, this communicative life was brought to the conscious attention of local participant-readers. The interviews were recorded and analyzed to explore ways that participants interacted with the LL and how meanings and understandings were constructed through dialogue enacted within the discursive aesthetic experience of moving in the landscape (Tuan, 1993). Pennycook (2009: 309) cited and elaborated de Certeau's (1990) thoughts that, 'The act of walking in the city is what brings to life, a

spatial realization of place'. Blommaert *et al.* (2005: 206) maintained that 'neighborhoods are often the kind of real material and symbolic space in which people anchor a dense complex of symbolic and material practices and to which they refer in performing these practices'. This study also draws from Farrell's (2006) work in reflective practices, which built on Schön's (1983) process of reflection-in-action, suggesting that being in the body, reflecting in action, at the moment of seeing, sharpens the senses and brings to the surface thoughts and emotions that are often socially constrained or suppressed by time.

Memphis: The Site

To outsiders, the city of Memphis is often perceived as a racially divided southern city known for its unique styles of music, barbeque cook-offs and high crime rates. However, this urban area is also the home of the National Civil Rights Museum, Elvis Presley's Graceland, Federal Express and Holiday Inn Corporations, as well as known for being the largest cargo hub in North America – a bustling intersection of major highways, railroads, river barge traffic and commercial airways.

Memphis is a city in black and white, a vibrant city with a divided heart. It is a city of contrasts and contradictions where southern charm and elegance meet southern tension and violence. For much of its history, Memphis has been inhabited by and divided by two peoples who share a common place and history but are separated by the social and political differences ascribed to race. (Bond & Sherman, 2003: 7)

In 2007, the total population of Memphis was recorded as 649,443 (US Census Report, American Community Survey, 2007). Of that number, 32.8% were white and 63.1% were African American, accounting for almost 96% of the total population. With 91.8% speaking English only, the public sphere in Memphis has been, for the most part, monolingual. However, in the past five years, substantial transnational flows of migrants 'have complicated this simple binary of black and white' (Bond & Sherman, 2003: 7), diffusing this dyadic stronghold of racial segregation. Bond and Sherman (2003: 7) stated, 'The newest migrants to Memphis include an estimated half-million Latinos, Asians, Africans, and people from the Middle East'. Peck (2007), editor of *The Commercial Appeal*, reported that the Hispanic population is estimated at well over 100,000 – three times the number published in the latest census reports (US Census Report, American Community Survey, 2007). Multilingual signs are now widespread throughout the LL of this urban area (e.g. see Figures 14.1 and 14.2), thus reinforcing Barni and Bagna's (2009: 126)

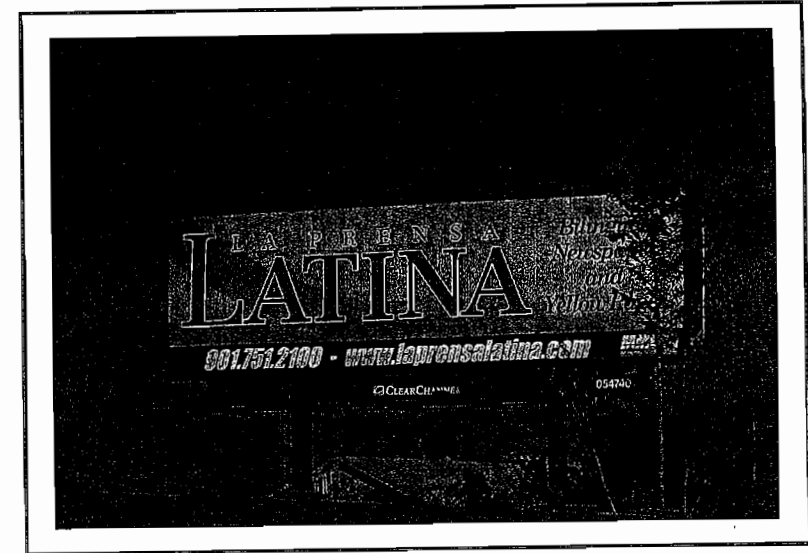


Figure 14.1 Billboard seen from the Interstate 240 by-pass (photographed October 2007)



Figure 14.2 On Getwell Rd (photographed October 2007)

assertion of the importance of the LL in the mapping of 'linguistic diversity in multilingual contexts'.

The Study

The overall purpose of this study was to collect and analyze the self-reported emotional understandings and visual perceptions of residents of Memphis, Tennessee, concerning migrant or minority language discourses in the LL. Taking a bottom-up approach described by Ben-Rafael *et al.* (2006), the study focused on unofficial public commercial signage and billboards within the city limits. While official government signs, such as street names and highway markers, were written in English, the codes enforcement policy in Memphis had no restrictions on language choices used on commercial signs (see Figures 14.3 and 14.4). In 2007 and 2008, ten individual onsite 'walking tour' interviews were conducted with residents of Memphis to collect their self-reported, emotional understandings of the LL. Communities with a high frequency of multilingualism on public signs were selected for the study and photographed. Figure 14.5 is a map of Memphis (google.earth.com) showing the street sites and areas selected for the 'walking tour' interviews.

These streets are major traffic arteries of the city and were selected due to the high frequency of multiple languages present on public signage.



Figure 14.3 On Summer Ave (photographed October 2007)

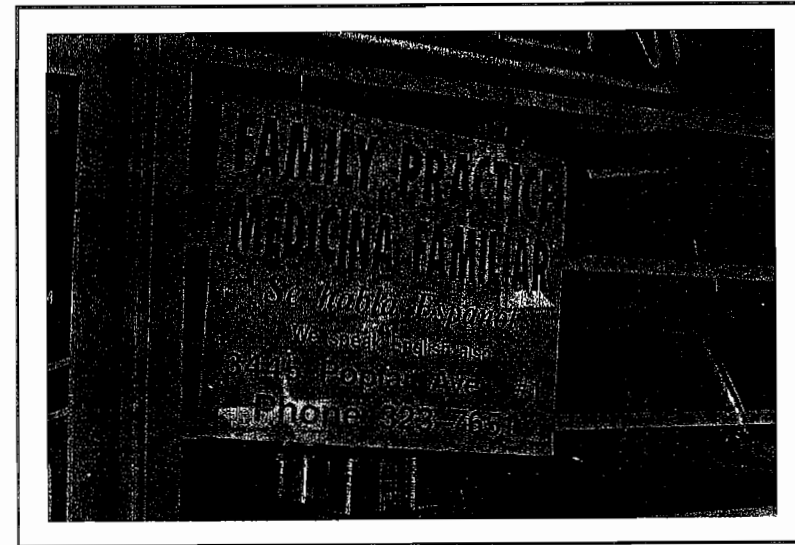


Figure 14.4 On Getwell Rd (photographed October 2007)

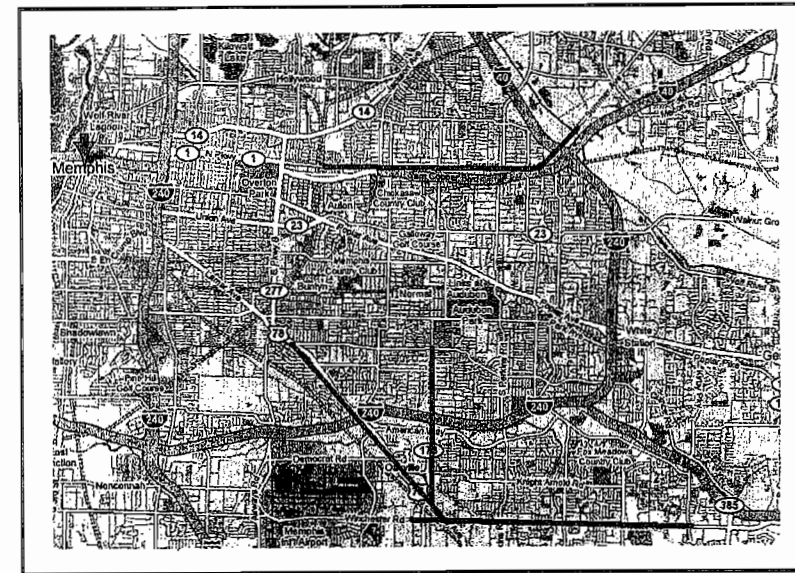


Figure 14.5 Map of Memphis (google.earth.com) with 'walking tour' street sites

Table 14.1 Description of languages of commercial place signs on 'walking tour' street sites

Streets	Number of businesses	English only	Multilingual/other language	Multilingual/other language signs (%)
Lamar Ave	140	128	12	8.5
Getwell Rd	139	120	19	13.6
Winchester Rd	249	213	36	14.5
Summer Ave	280	231	49	17.5
Total	808	692	116	14.3

Prior to the 'walking tour' interviews, these sites were digitally photographed for later reference. In the areas designated for the 'walking tours', unofficial community/commercial business name signs were counted. Table 14.1 shows the total number of businesses and the number with percentages of business name signs containing multilingualism or languages other than English.

The data collection was conducted in the following phases: (1) the selection of the sites, photographing and describing of 'walking tour' sites; (2) selection of the participants, initial contact with prospective participants through flyers circulated in public offices with a brief interview; (3) conducting the postmodern 'walking tour' interviews; (4) recording of field notes and transcription of the interviews; and (5) conducting a follow-up meeting to ensure validity of data by giving the participants copies of their interview transcripts and an opportunity to continue the dialogue and add, clarify and provide any other thoughts and feelings about their responses.

The Participants

The selection of participants was initiated through flyers with information about the study that were distributed in public offices, non-academic institutional settings. After an initial meeting with each consenting participant, dates and times were scheduled for individual 'walking tours'. The participants were purposefully selected to reflect the demographic diversity of the current population in Memphis. The group of participants represented both long-established and migrant residents; half had lived in Memphis all their lives while the other half had migrated to the area. The participants were purposefully selected to reflect the demographic diversity of the current population in Memphis. There were five males and five females between the ages of 20 and 80. Of the group, seven reported that English was their first language while the

other three, one born in Ethiopia, one born in Mexico and one in Cambodia, reported Amharic, Spanish and Khmer (C'mai) as their first languages. Five were self-described as white/Caucasian, two as African American/Black, one as Ethiopian, one as Hispanic and one as Asian. All the participants held jobs in areas of public service in the city of Memphis.

The following questions were posed to the participants during the 'walking tours':

- How do you feel when you see signs in languages other than English?
- When was the first time you noticed new languages present on signs in this area?
- What was your initial thought or reaction to the linguistic changes?
- Do you feel at home visiting or shopping in this area? If yes, why? Or, if not, why so?
- Do you go into stores and shops that advertise in languages other than English?
- Does or did this place have a special meaning or memory for you?
- What do you think the languages on the signs say about the people groups in this area?

Interacting with the Linguistic Landscape in Urban Spaces

Results obtained from the study showed, as Huebner (2009) suggested, that the ways individuals are reading, interpreting and responding to these texts are complex and not easily generalized. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger (1997) stated the moment of seeing is integrated with our expectations and previous experiences of meaning, which cannot be separated from the context or physical setting in which they are observed. Berger (1997: 8) stated that making meaning of visual texts, or any form of art or literacy, is very much dependent on 'what we know and what we believe'. Individuals approached this text as historical bodies with a variety of backgrounds, discourses, languages and experiences – everything came into play at the moment of seeing.

Identity and the linguistic landscape

The findings in this study indicated that the LL as a stimulus text and 'walking tour' as a methodology elicited from participants a series of self-positioning statements. These self-positioning statements changed from one participant to another participant and at times even within the same participant as different identities were accessed. At approximately the same location in the 'walking tour' and near the beginning of each tour, the participants were asked a similar question, 'How do you feel when

you see signs in other languages?' Results showed that 30% responded positively to multilingual signs; 20% indicated negative feelings about the presence of migrant discourses; and 10% expressed mixed emotions about current linguistic changes. Although the remaining 40% stated that they were neutral or had not noticed, their positions shifted as interviews progressed. From the two excerpts that follow, one can begin to understand how the LL connects individuals to the environment as they negotiated their identities and self-positioned themselves.

Extract 1: Participant 2, multilingual male, originally from Ethiopia

Interviewer: When you are looking at signs in other languages, how do you feel? (pause) Would you not go into a place if you saw a language that you did not understand?

P2: It depends. For example, if I plan to go to a Chinese restaurant, and there is a Chinese sign, that doesn't deter me. But if I am looking, for example, for car maintenance, to buy some item, and the description is written only in Spanish it doesn't make sense to me; unless there is no other option, I don't go there. But if I want to eat Mexican food and the sign is written in Hispanic, it doesn't matter to me.

This participant's responses indicated a pragmatic, detached position in relation to the LL. Impressing the researcher with a cosmopolitan-like attitude, he was not deterred by unknown languages, if he had a purpose or use for services or businesses even though they were inscribed with unfamiliar languages, he would go in. His final comment in this excerpt 'it doesn't matter to me' reinforced the distant position he chose to maintain in relation to the migrant discourses on the signs he was observing. This participant's identity as a highly educated professional was accessed during the interaction in contrast to the participant in extract 2 that follows:

Extract 2: Participant 6, bilingual female, originally from Mexico

Interviewer: Well, how do you feel when you see Spanish on signs?

P6: Uhhh... well, I mean it makes me realize that our population is growing because before you would never really see a Mexican restaurant especially like in Spanish. And now most restaurants they already have them in Spanish when before they used to kind of have it to where the people would understand it like 'The Mexican Restaurant' or something like that.

Interviewer: Yeah.

P6: It's changed. Now they do have a certain name, you know, the name that they want to put on the restaurant.

In contrast to Participant 2, Participant 6 positioned herself within the migrant Hispanic community commenting that 'our population is

growing'. At the end of this excerpt, she also shifted slightly in this position by referring to Hispanics as 'they'. Not yet confident in this interaction, she indirectly acknowledged changes in the community now allowing Hispanics freedom to express their identities instead of catering to the dominant language group. It was interesting to note that as the interview progressed and she realized the extent of the Hispanic population in Memphis, her confidence grew and expressions of her Hispanic identity became more bold and enthusiastic. This seemed to indicate that individual ethnic vitality is boosted by the presence and frequency of personal minority language in the LL (Landry & Bourhis, 1997).

Connections of culture and ethnicity

On Winchester Avenue, the third street site on the 'walking tour', one of the most emotionally provocative literacy objects in the LL was observed. The multiple responses and meanings the participants reported and ascribed to the impact of this visual representation substantively showed the diversity in the ways individuals make sense of icons and literate objects based on their own culture, values, ethnic backgrounds and experiences (Shohamy & Waksman, 2009). Standing boldly on the property of the World Overcomers Church, at the corner of a busy intersection, was a modified replicate of the Statue of Liberty (see Figures 14.6 and 14.7). In this version, the statue lifted in her right hand a cross – instead of a torch. Resting in the curve of her left arm, was not just a book, but what appeared to be a portion of the Bible. At the base of the statue were the words, 'America Must Return to Christ'. In the background were rows of international flags. Below are responses from five different participants when asked what they thought about this site:

P2 (male/Ethiopia): Sometimes I think they are trying to show that they are international. But sometimes I don't understand it because when they have four or five flags, how come they selected just those flags?

P5 (male/white/Memphis): Well, there was a lot of controversy. Some thought it was a violation of church and state.

P8 (male/black/Memphis): The Statue of Liberation. ... people were saying they were so sick of things, in Memphis, that had signs and things that were negative in the Black community. And the church decided to put up the Statue of Liberty and said because we want to say that we are American and America needs to follow its path back to Christ.

P9 (female/Cambodia): I remember what we're here for, why we're here.

P10 (male/white/Memphis): I don't like it! It's just too in your face.

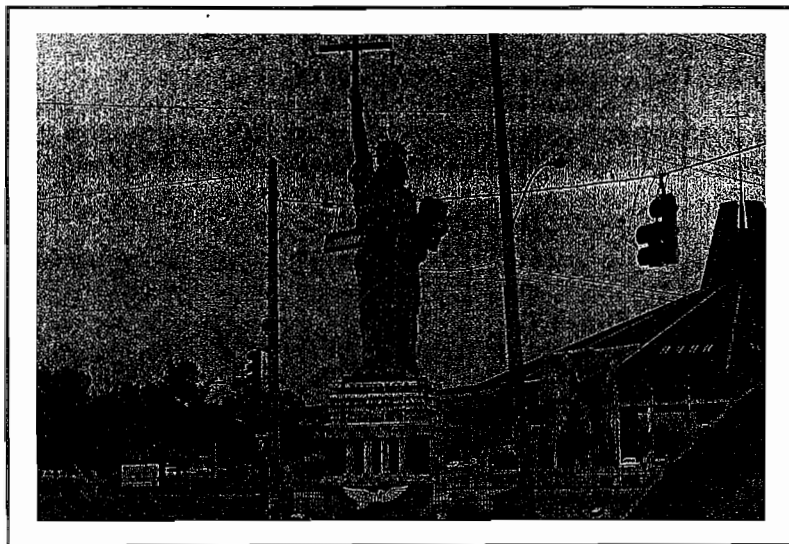


Figure 14.6 Statue located at Winchester and Kirby (photographed November 2007)

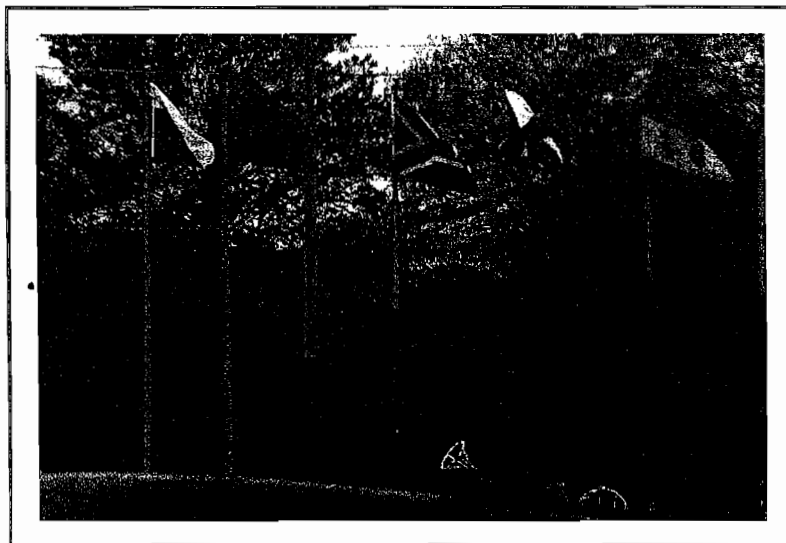


Figure 14.7 International flags displayed behind the statue on Winchester Ave

The responses to the icons as shown in Figures 14.6 and 14.7 emphasized Berger's claim that in the moment of seeing the interpretation of text, images and icons are integrated with the viewer's background and experiences. The statue and flags triggered strong emotions but had different, multiple meanings for each participant. Interestingly, this data also showed the lack of interdependence between word and text to create meaning. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 17) maintained that the semiotic components of a visual text are 'an independently organized and structured message—connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it: and similarly the other way around'. Most participants reacted to the written text and visual components independently, not as a unified text. The message in the written text was often subdued by the icons.

Connecting responses to the linguistic landscape with political and social discourses

Stimulated by the LL and the conversation during the 'walking tours', participants spontaneously introduced a variety of topics and relevant social issues. For example, some interesting topics discussed in the interviews, triggered by responses to the LL, were race, religion, segregation, illegal immigration, Ebonics/African American Vernacular, poverty, economic development, personal cultural traditions and family values. In each instance, in the analysis of interview texts, the researcher was able to trace specific wider discourses influencing the participants' responses as in the following extract.

Extract 3: Participant 3, monolingual female from Memphis

Interviewer: When did you start noticing things like that (pointing) and languages present in this area in Memphis?

P3: This widespread, I would say about six years ago. It has really mushroomed. It was always spread out more; it has been fairly recent and fairly fast.

Interviewer: How does it make you feel?

P3: Well, I mean, the whole illegal immigrant thing, you know, gives it a different light to me. At first, it was just, OK, these are Mexican people and it didn't register with me that, you know, the Hispanics are here and, OK, they're working and minding their own business and they seem to be nice and stuff until all the political controversy came out about them being illegal and, you know, that kind of stuff. That has drawn my attention more to it and maybe changed my view a little bit.

One of the most interesting observations in this excerpt was how clearly this demonstrated the influence of a wider discourse, triggered by

the LL, beyond this conversation and interaction. Although not explicitly stated, this participant positioned herself as legal resident in opposition to the Mexican community, symbolically referenced in the signage. The data in this section shows that the LL is never a neutral context. It is always a point of reference for self-positioning. Accordingly, there is always some form of psychological response to the LL.

Co-constructing knowledge of place and space

The following portion of the interview with Participant 9 exhibits how the interviewer and participant together discursively constructed a space that allowed conversation to flow naturally and, as a result, produced complex multilayered understandings of the LL text that did not previously reside in one individual. During the interview, as distance in the perceived status of interviewer and participant decreased and the roles blurred, conversation was enhanced, understandings that were co-constructed would not have been as rich and meaningful without their social interaction in concert with the material, multimodal text.

Extract 4: Participant 9, bilingual female, originally from Cambodia

P9: (pointing) Is that the Vietnamese temple?

Interviewer: Yeah, we need to turn... I've taken pictures of this one.

P9: The Vietnamese temple. They were telling me about it. I was going to drive by one day. So this is it.

Interviewer: Uh huh.

P9: (pointing to a large flag) You know that's a religious flag, don't you?

Interviewer: No. I didn't know that. I need a picture of it. Really, I didn't know that.

P9: Each color represents a different thing that Buddha gave up his life for Vietnamese, uh, they.... Gah, this is big! (Walking over to a statue)

Interviewer: It is big.

P9: I'm surprised they don't have signs. The one, the one on...

Interviewer: They did before. I took a picture of the sign before. It looks like they remodeled.

P9: (pointing to another statue). That's Sray Daene. You see a lot of pendants with her on it.

Interviewer: What was her name again?

P9: I know in Cambodian. We call it Sray Daene. They say she like Moses. She went up to heaven though she did not die. If you have any connection with her that you see her in your meditation. You see a lot of pendants in jade with her image on them.

Interviewer: Her image on them. Wow.

In this excerpt, that creative, safe space sought for in postmodern interviewing, is evident in that the tone of the conversation and the empathy between the researcher and participant resembled that of friends. Upon arrival at this site (see Figure 14.8), near the end of the 'walking tour', with the first pointing gesture, the participant assumed the role of teacher and the researcher became a genuinely eager student. Again, icons in the LL at this site elicited strong emotional responses. Participant 9's expression 'Gah, this is big!' was so expressive, ethnic and natural and was accompanied by gestures to show surprise or awe. The researcher's impression of the scene recorded in field notes indicated that there was an absence of conscious social performance at this place. The personal identity, that aspect of identity described by Harré and Van Langenhove (1998) as how we are known to ourselves, was perceived, freely and bodily expressed. The participant's actions to increase the researcher's understanding of the relevancy of the cultural icons and images enhanced the knowledge and meanings of the icons that were observed at this site. Making meaning of the LL marking this place grew out of discursive interaction and co-construction of knowledge in a space created within the 'walking tour' interview.

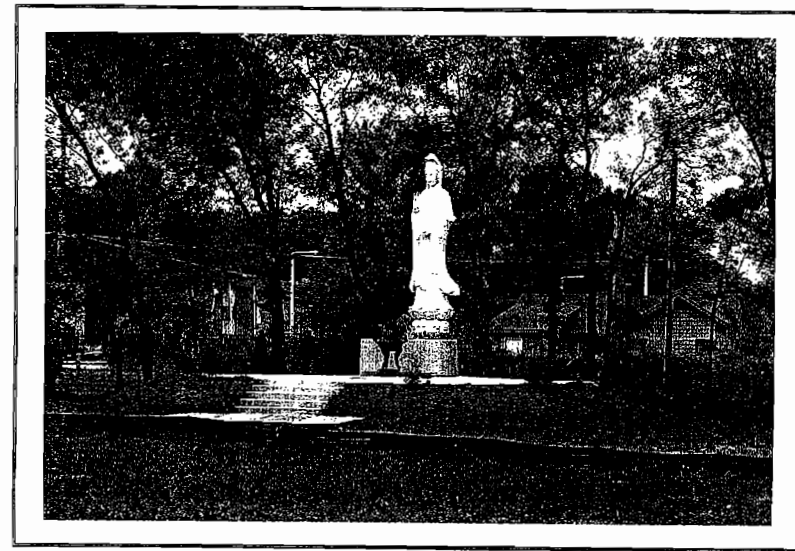


Figure 14.8 Statue at Vietnamese Temple off Winchester (Photographed October 2007)

Conclusion

The postmodern 'walking-tour' interview methodology described in this chapter offers researchers in the LL, and in applied linguists in general, a tool for exploring cognitive and emotional understandings played out in response to the LL in urban settings that surround them. Results showed that the LL served as a catalyst or 'stimulus text' mediating understandings of public space while eliciting emotional and psychological statements of belonging and identity in time and place. The LL text was never neutral. Owing to the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the participants, interpretations and responses to the LL were varied and deeply connected to their own personal and professional identities as well as individual ethnic, linguistic and cultural orientations. These results substantiated Hanauer's (2003, 2006) assertion that meanings are not fixed, but reside within the individual who is in the center of competing and imposed social discourses. With this research tool, attention to the complexities of public language use, and the multiple meanings and individual interpretations of the LL was possible. However, more systematic data collection procedures should be developed to enable the researcher to compare and synthesize the responses for broader understandings.

In addition to the stimulus of the LL to trigger emotional responses, findings from this study illuminated a dynamic process of negotiation and co-construction of meanings through the interactions between the interviewer, the participant and the LL. Maintaining a critical dialogic approach, processes of meaning construction were identified and analyzed to provide the researcher with a system to track internalized thoughts – represented in self-reported statements triggered by explicit focus on the LL – as they were externalized and shaped through the dialogic interaction. While analyzing discursive processes proved to be very challenging, the current study's focus on the dynamic interactions provided rich layers of complexity for understanding the cognitive and emotional responses to the LL. Further development of this analysis approach is needed in order to more fully answer the questions posed in future studies investigating readership of the LL.

As for limitations, the participants in this particular study represented only a small sampling of the residents in Memphis and the selected sites provided only a partial picture of the linguistic diversity present in multilingual signage and multimodal literacies so widely dispersed throughout this urban space. As with many modern urban areas in the USA, Memphis is in linguistic transition and deserves a more thorough study of the LL. Nonetheless, 'walking tours' that focus on the LL in selected areas will provide the researcher with opportunities to open dialogue about this transition, to raise awareness to the potential benefits

and resources embedded in multilingual communities and to take an active role in promoting and preserving multilingualism one individual at a time. To that end, it is important to continue assiduous investigations that explore local feelings and attitudes about multilingualism and linguistic changes in our urban communities, as local attitudes can either create obstacles or establish bridges for a global society.

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