

Languages on display: revealing policy, power, and social dynamics in Linguistic Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

Exploring linguistic landscapes in public places denotes the languages' position used within society and the extent of their acceptance by the wider community, reflecting not only the cultural, social, and linguistic dynamics of languages but also the language policy and power that prevails in the area. The current theoretical article discusses linguistic landscapes through the prism of multilingualism and linguistic hybridity, unveiling the social, political, and cultural dynamics of political forces, language policy, and ethnolinguistic sustainability through specific examples drawn from the pertinent literature review and highlights their role in enhancing cultural awareness, visibility, and viability of minority languages.

KEYWORDS

Linguistic landscapes, language policy, linguistic hybridity

RÉSUMÉ

Explorer les paysages linguistiques dans les lieux publics désigne la position des langues au sein de la société et l'ampleur de leur acceptation par la communauté au sens large, reflétant non seulement les dynamiques culturelles, sociales et linguistiques des langues mais aussi la politique linguistique et le pouvoir qui prévalent dans la région. L'article théorique actuel aborde les paysages linguistiques à travers le prisme du multilinguisme et de l'hybridité linguistique, dévoilant les dynamiques sociales, politiques et culturelles des forces politiques, de la politique linguistique et de la durabilité ethnolinguistique à travers des exemples spécifiques tirés de la revue pertinente de la littérature et met en lumière leur rôle dans le renforcement de la conscience culturelle, de la visibilité et de la viabilité des langues minoritaires.

MOTS-CLÉS

Paysages linguistiques, politique linguistique, hybridité linguistique

INTRODUCTION

Linguistic landscapes (LL), which has been an emerging topic in the field of sociolinguistics, examine the coexistence and interaction of languages in a specific area by exploring static elements (e.g., signs, advertisements, placards, inscriptions, graffiti, street names), mobile

elements, (e.g., store bags, printed T-shirts, tattoos) as well as the individuals' interaction with these elements. In other words, the study of LL comprises a three-dimensional approach; the use of languages and the ways they appear in text, the predetermined public or private study space, and the time during which the study is carried out constitute the pivotal elements of an equation whose outcomes are subject to change based on human input.

Exploring the LL of a public space demonstrates the position of languages in society and the extent of their acceptance by the wider community. At the same time, it reflects the cultural, social, and linguistic dynamics of a society, setting the pillars for further research on the language policies and linguistic powers adopted in a specific area. In addition, the LL research helps understand the underlying principles of languages and the spatio-temporal environment interaction, which shape the social reality and cultural identity of a region. In this context, considering the dynamic nature of this research field, the present theoretical article aims to present LL through the prism of multilingualism and linguistic hybridity to reveal social, political, and cultural expressions of authoritarian power, language policy, and ethnolinguistic sustainability through specific examples drawn from the pertinent literature review.

WHAT ARE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES?

Linguistic landscapes are the visible use of language(s) in signs, advertising posters, street names, and inscriptions that appear in public spaces (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) and function as informational and symbolic means in space, demonstrating the position and power of the languages of the people living in a specific area. To put it differently, LL constitutes a visual representation of the language(s) used in a specific area and highlights the way in which languages coexist and interact in this area. Archaeological findings of bilingual or multilingual inscriptions, such as the Rosetta Stone (2nd century BC) (Gorter, 2013) and the Callimachus Stone (39 BC), reveal that since ancient times, languages and cultures have coexisted in people's daily lives. These findings demonstrate that multilingualism has always been a necessity for effective communication with informational and symbolic functions among different communities (Clackson, 2012; Mairs, 2020).

Approaches to the study of Linguistic Landscapes

While reviewing the body of literature in the field of linguistic landscapes, it was crucial to collect seminal works that have been considered as pioneer studies, laid the groundwork for the subsequent research development, and amplified its scope. Following a chronological order, the option of pertinent studies was made based on their impact and contribution to the relevant field by providing theoretical frameworks and methodological models, as discussed in literature reviews in the academic community (e.g., Chen, 2025; Gorter, 2013).

The earliest studies addressing LL date back to the late 1970s. Rosenbaum et al. (1977) studied English-language store signs on Keren Kayemet Street in Jerusalem, while Spolsky and Cooper (1991) investigated public signage in the Old City of Jerusalem, as reported in Spolsky (2024). However, it was Landry and Bourhis' (1997) study that formed the basis for subsequent research. More specifically, their study of 2,010 French-speaking secondary school students in Canada demonstrated that LL was a crucial factor in the social and psychological development of individuals' bilingualism who lived within the LL. Furthermore, the study showed that Canada's LL was an important and visible factor that affected ethnolinguistic vitality. On the one hand, the informational function of the LL of a specific area was a distinctive feature that denoted the extensive use of a particular language or languages in both institutional and private contexts. On the other hand, the symbolic

function of the LL affected the individuals' social identity who lived in the area. In addition, the presence or absence of specific languages in the LL either supported or undermined their use within the community, which could be either an incentive or disincentive for a language shift to the dominant language.

Scollon and Scollon (2003) introduced the term of Geosemiotics according to which signs can only be interpreted in relation to the social and cultural context. In other words, the language, the place, and the way in which the signs are placed indicated social messages. Furthermore, according to the researchers, the language(s) that appear on a sign may contain messages that indicate the geopolitical positioning (Geopolitics) and the populations' linguistic representation of the area. In addition to sociocultural associations, the language(s) present on a sign can indicate an attachment or preference for what the language represents. An indicative example is Leeman and Modan's (2009) research in Chinatown, Washington where the use of Chinese had an informational character and was linked to the reinforcement of the cultural identity of the Chinese populations that had been active in the area. However, even when the Chinese population moved to the suburbs and consequently the need for cultural preservation decreased, the use of Chinese in the area remained but acquired a rather commercial and aesthetic character. In the same vein, Nikolaou's (2017) research on the commercial signs in the city center of Athens and Kallithea area led to similar results. Namely, Greek was restricted to its functional role, whereas English and Italian prevailed and added a multilingual character to the areas that reflected the desire of the commercial enterprises to project a cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and modern Figure.

LL has mainly aimed to connect the spatial, linguistic diversity of public space signs to the social structure, studying dynamic, multilingual environments such as Brussels (e.g. Van Mensel et al., 2016), the city of Jerusalem (e.g. Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Spolsky & Cooper, 1991), the Province of Quebec (e.g. Backhaus, 2009), Tokyo (e.g. Backhaus, 2006), and the Basque Country in Spain (e.g. Basterretxea Santiso, 2025; Gorter & Cenoz, 2015). In particular, Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) studied the use of Hebrew, Arabic, and English in cities in Israel and East Jerusalem, separating data into two categories. Firstly, top-down data, such as signs placed by institutional bodies (e.g., national, local, cultural, social, educational, medical or legal institutions) showed that there was an extensive use of Hebrew, which was the dominant language of the region. Arabic was quite limited, though it was the second official language of the state at the time of the study. Secondly, bottom-up data such as signs placed by individuals and private businesses (e.g., professional, legal, medical, consulting offices, and food, clothing, furniture stores) were mainly in Arabic in areas with Palestinian populations to cover communication needs. Hebrew, English, and languages spoken by large immigrant groups (e.g., Russian) were also used due to bilingualism and the need to attract a wider audience. Consequently, although minority languages were preserved in the informal, private context, they were marginalized in the official context, revealing linguistic hierarchies and reflecting social and political powers.

LL research has gradually expanded, while the first static approaches have given way to more complex studies that introduced time as a key factor and individuals as agents whose undefined identities and motivation to use languages and semiotic resources affected the LL (Spolsky, 2024). In brief, according to Van Mensel et al. (2016), three main approaches emerged throughout the literature. Firstly, the Geographical approaches focused on the connection between language and space and highlighted how immigrants' languages influenced the local linguistic structure. For instance, Barni and Bagna (2008, 2010, 2015) highlighted the need for the promotion of migrant languages, underscoring the social and cultural changes observed in different mountainous regions in Italy. Secondly, diachronic approaches focused on the change of LL over time. Spalding's (2013) study in Ireland examined street signs from 1750 to 2000, highlighting how the LL of Cork shifted from Irish

to English, thus reflecting political, linguistic, and social trends that reinforced the linguistic transition from a local to a more globalized language. Finally, symbiotic approaches focused on how individuals interacted with LL. For example, Papen (2012) interviewed shop owners, artists, and activists in Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin to highlight how LL reflected social change.

Brinkmann and Melo-Pfeifer (2023) studied LL in two interconnected axes that dynamically interact with each other. The horizontal axis described how the signs appeared in physical, materialistic, and textual ways [e.g., location, material, language(s)] and the vertical axis analyzed the symbolic interpretation of the visual representation. The researchers argued that the analysis of LL needs to follow a holistic approach so that the language is analyzed in context and in relation to other semiotic elements, such as figures, designs, and logos. Furthermore, Karpava (2024) collected 4,200 bottom-up photographs of signs from all over Cyprus. Examining the semiotic appearance of the signs (e.g., color, size), the research concluded that the LL of Cyprus revealed its multilingual and cultural identity, created by globalization, increased population movements, and tourist inflows to the island. In addition, the LL of Cyprus reflected the population's customs and positive attitude towards multilingualism in a complex yet unique way.

In recent years, sociolinguistic research has shifted toward examining LL in educational settings (e.g., Brinkmann & Melo-Pfeifer, 2023; Gorter & Cenoz, 2022; Karafylli & Maligkoudi, 2023), focusing on the role of multilingual schoolscapes as educational learning tools. In addition, LL research has also transcended to more private spaces, such as homes (e.g. Boivin, 2020; Kitsiou & Bratimou, 2023; Yu, 2022). Moreover, aiming to record linguistic and cultural diversity, research has gradually moved away from the purely logocentric examination of LL and has incorporated further semiotic means, such as sounds (e.g. El Ayadi, 2022; Häkkinen, 2024), smells (e.g. Boivin, 2020; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015; Prada, 2024), tastes (e.g. Biró, 2022;), clothes (e.g. Coupland, 2010; Johnson, 2023), tattoos (e.g. Banda et al., 2024), creating new, multimodal and hybrid research fields (e.g., Demska, 2019; Spilioti & Giaxoglou, 2019).

LL research has inevitably expanded to the digital world. Blogs, vlogs, websites, and applications are the new fields of LL research. Although the presence of languages and their interaction in digital LL resembles that of the physical world (Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2009), the concepts of space and time fade in the virtual world. The elements of the digital LL move dynamically and may change continuously without leaving “traces” as in the physical world. In addition, digital LL are accessible to anyone without presupposing a face-to-face interaction (Biró, 2018). Digital environments are multimodal, and in most cases, multilingualism is imposed ad hoc as an informational and sociocultural necessity. Additionally, social networking allows the creation of emerging, digital, linguistic, social, and cultural identities, which do not necessarily align with the linguistic, social, and cultural identity that users hold in the physical world. These identities may change or even alternate depending on the digital places and functions. Furthermore, the alternation of linguistic codes and hybridity (e.g., form of mixed spellings, use of alphanumeric sequences) is an integral part of digital LL (Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2009). In fact, Maly and Blommaert (2019) have observed that the digital media are dynamic mediators in shaping not only the digital LL but also meaning-making procedures and social action. For example, reviews, comments, and photos that users may upload to a digital platform, website, or application influence the structure of the digital LL and the human intervention intertwines and interacts with technological interfaces, system interfaces, algorithms, and automated computer programs, such as social bots.

MAPPING LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES IN GREECE

In the Greek context, which is rather under-presented in the pertinent literature review, LL research proves that in addition to Greek, a number of languages and cultures coexist, while English holds a dominant position (Nikolaou, 2017). Despite the traditionally monolingual character of the Greek society, LL, especially in urban centers, has been changing dynamically due to the increasing migration/refugee flows mainly from countries of the Middle East.

LL empirical research on the Greek context seems to be rather limited to date (e.g., Canakis & Kersten-Pejanić, 2016; Gogonas & Maligkoudi, 2019). More specifically, in the comparative study of Canakis and Kersten-Pejanić (2016) on the LL of Athens and Belgrade city centers, the researchers analyzed the symbolic and ideological function of the LL in the demarcated area between Keramikos-Gazi-Syggrou. The findings led to the conclusion that the LL constituted an “arena” for the popular, public negotiation of gendered meanings. Canakis (2016) studied the dynamic LL of Stadiou Street in Athens, which was a “canvas” where political, economic, and racial views were dynamically expressed. Similarly, Santsak (2023) studied the LL of Gladstonos Street in the Athens city center. The LL indicated that the area revealed social identity management policies. In the same vein, Christoulaki (2017) highlighted issues of gender and sexuality through Semiotics that were reflected in the LL of Mytilene.

Sociolinguistic research also seems to focus its interest on the multilingualism of LL. For example, Spilioti and Giaxoglou (2019) focused on the use of translanguaging and linguistic hybridity while studying Greeklish (the use of Greek language written using the Latin script) and Engreek (the use of English language written using the Greek script) in the Athens International Airport and the Exarcheia area. This research examined transcription as a possible indicator of ideological positions and their contribution to the construction of specific identities through top-down and bottom-up elements, as well as the reinterpretation of English elements in relation to the physical space in which they had been placed. Diamantopoulou (2019) also studied the linguistic landscape of a central square in Patras, discovering the latent cultural and linguistic diversity and the semiotic dynamics of the area.

Sociopolitical, economic, and humanitarian crises are reflected in the LL and constitute an important part of the study. For example, Gogonas and Maligkoudi (2019) investigated the LL of Athens, Thessaloniki, and Kalamata city centers and examined how translanguaging acquired political and ideological functions during the economic crisis in Greece. In the context of the migration crisis, Canakis (2021) studied the importance of chronotopes in the LL of Mytilene and its gradual transformation from a semi-urban to an internationalized LL. In addition, Lees (2022) studied the translated Greek-to-English signs in the urban landscape of Thessaloniki during the pandemic, focusing on the emerging identities of the creators of the elements. At the same time, during the pandemic, Canakis' (2022) research re-examined the concept of chronotope as the dynamics and materiality of the signs of the LL influence the construction of space as place.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES THROUGH SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

LL is of particular importance for understanding the cultural and social reality of a region, highlighting the value of multilingualism and multiculturalism (Blommaert, 2010; Diamantopoulou, 2019; El Ayadi, 2022; Karpava, 2024). Official signs (e.g., road signs, signs on government buildings, names of public institutions), private signs (e.g., personal signs

used by individuals or small businesses), commercial signs (e.g., shop signs, advertisements), and graffiti in public spaces reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity and offer a picture of the social and political changes. Furthermore, LL indicate how minority languages are maintained and coexist in an area (Gorter et al. 2019; James 2016, Johnson 2023, Kasanga 2010).

For example, the sign “Welcome to Greektown” placed in Greektown, Toronto, Canada, is posted in a blue colour and in a font that resembles ancient Greek letters (Figure 1). At the same time, the street names are written in both English and Greek, demonstrating the increased prevalence of the Greek element and the prevalence of the Greek diaspora in the area (Figure 2).

FIGURE 1



Sign, Greektown, Toronto, Canada, © Ashok Lamichhane/Toronto Observer

FIGURE 2



Street names, Greektown, Toronto, Canada © GTD Aquitaine at English Wikipedia

LL reveals aspects of language politics and power relations in the social reality of a region (Prada 2024, Van Mensel et al. 2016). For example, the choice of language on Canadian stop signs demonstrates policies that empower or oppress specific linguistic communities. Depending on the socio-political circumstances of the region, stop signs are either bilingual with alternating language order (Figure 3 from Toronto, Ontario and Figure 4 from Winnipeg, Manitoba) or monolingual (Figure 5 depicts the French version of “stop” as “arrêt” from the French-speaking region of Montreal, Quebec) or multilingual, as the example in Figure 6, where the Cree and Chipewyan languages of the indigenous populations spoken in the Northwest Territories of Canada have been added to the sign.

FIGURE 3



Road Sign, Toronto, Canada © User:Ibagli

FIGURE 4



Road Sign, Winnipeg, Canada, © Christopher Morris, Credit: Getty Figures

FIGURE 5



Road Sign, Montreal, Canada. Source: <https://focusmoving.com/should-i-move-to-montreal/>

FIGURE 6



Road Sign, Northwest Territories, Canada. Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/mildlyinteresting/comments/k9hjtj/this_stop_sign_i_came_across_in_northern_canada/?rdt=34136

The visibility and prominence of languages can indicate social hierarchies and power dynamics, reflecting governmental policies. The choice of language on signs often indicates the ethnic, cultural, or regional identity of residents (Pennycook, 2018; Prada, 2024; Van Mensel et al., 2016). For example, in the LL of Belgium, the official languages, French, Flemish, and German, coexist with obvious hierarchical dynamics. In the central train station of the city of Brussels, which has been officially bilingual since 1963 (Blommaert 2011),

French comes first on the signs, with Flemish following and German being absent (Figure 7). However, 50 kilometers away, in the train station of Antwerp in the Flemish region, Flemish is prominently placed first in a larger font, followed by French, German, and English (Figure 8).

FIGURE 7



Entrance sign, Central Station, Brussels © Japplemedia

FIGURE 8



Sign, Central Station, Antwerp © belgium-travel.com

Moreover, the LL reveals how different languages not only coexist but also influence each other and adapt to each other, creating phenomena of translanguaging and linguistic hybridity (Demska, 2019; Matras, 2020; Spilioti & Giaxoglou, 2019). For example, in Figure 9, the English word WiFi is used along with Greek to highlight the need for internet access in a graffiti message, “We wanted Love, now we want Wifi”. In Figure 10, to communicate

“danger” in a warning sign, the German word “kaput: is used in Engreek, not meaning “broken or damaged” but used as a semantic loan word meaning “dead” in Modern Greek since the German Occupation. Figure 11 presents an example of linguistic hybridity, where the English word “art” is creatively used to create a pun for the name “Dodonartes” a drama club of the Epirus Association of Patras, denoting both the geographical area of Artas, Epirus and the club’s artistic activity.

FIGURE 9

Graffiti with Greek and English words © Viral Greece

FIGURE 10

Warning sign. Source: www.ekriti.gr

FIGURE 11



Poster of the Pan-Peiriotic Association of Patras © Evgenia Berdesi

In areas where ethnic or linguistic minorities exist, bilingual signs play an important role in maintaining communities’ ethnic identity (Leeman & Modan 2009). However, the presence or absence of such signs may provoke social reactions (Van Mensel et al. 2016). For example, the legally placed road signs in Finiki, Albania were vandalized by Albanian nationalists (Figure 12). Greek names are erased even though the area has been officially recognized by the Albanian state as a minority area. Similarly, the trilingual road sign in Thessaloniki indicating Kemal Ataturk’s house has sparked protests in the local community. The sign is written in Greek and English, while the name of Kemal Ataturk is written in Turkish (Figure 13). The use of double inverted commas in place of Greek quotation marks raises questions about the creators’ latent meaning and motives (Spolsky, 2024).

FIGURE 12



Vandalized road signs, Finiki, Albania. Source: <https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/966393/voreia-ipeiros-alvano-i-ethnikistes-vandalisan-diglosses-pinakides/>

FIGURE 13



Road sign for the Turkish Consulate, Thessaloniki © e-Pontos.org

In addition to indicating ethnic and cultural identity, LL delves deeper to reveal the individuals' social identity of an area (e.g., Canakis, 2016; Sandsak 2023,) political and gender beliefs and highlight otherness (e.g. Christoulaki 2017). In other words, LL constitutes a creative field where all verbal and semiotic resources contribute dynamically to capture individuals' social identity of an area. For example, in Figures 14 and 15, a graffiti of a homeless man sleeping and the English inscription "Dedicated to the poor and homeless here & around the globe" can be found at Benaki Street, Exarchia. The size of the graffiti and the location indicate part of the social identity of the area. Similarly, the graffiti in Figure 16, placed at the entrance of Perama, Piraeus was inspired both by the work accidents in the Perama Shipbuilding and Repair Zone and the shipwreck of Pylos on May 21, 2023, where more than 80 people from Egypt, Syria, Pakistan, and Palestine died. The graffiti bears the signature of the Youth Communist Party of Greece supporters and depicts a life jacket, a work helmet, and money shaped as coffins. The inscription "CRIME OF PERMANENCE THE SYSTEM KILLS" clearly reflects the traditional center-left political beliefs of the population of the Perama area in Piraeus.

FIGURE 14



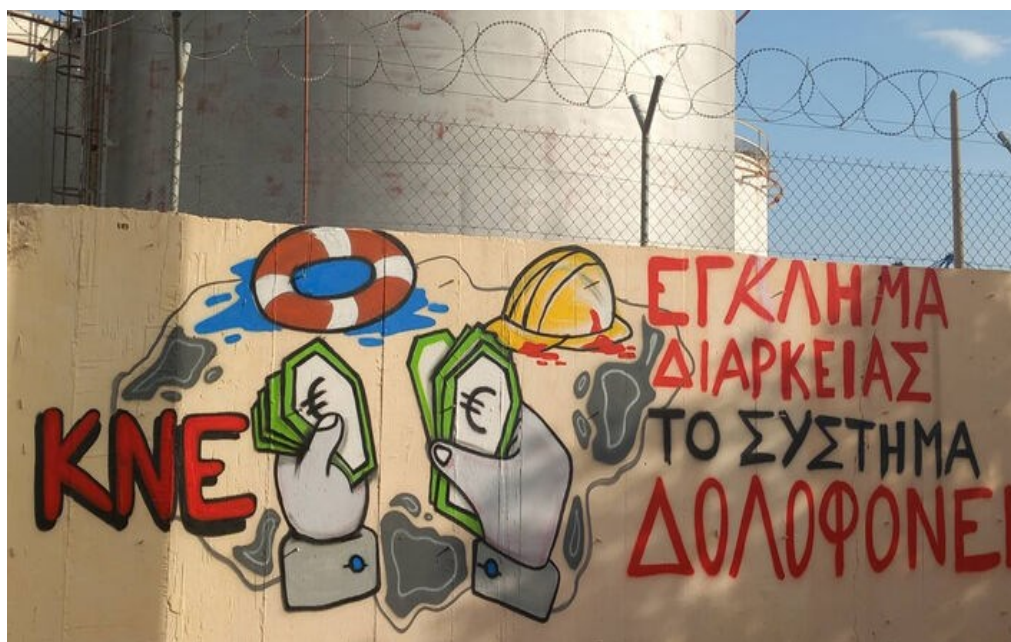
Grffiti, Benaki Street, Exarchia ©George Fiorakis

FIGURE 15



Graffiti, Benaki Street, Exarchia ©George Fiorakis

FIGURE 16



Graffiti Entrance Perama, KNE. Source:

<https://www.902.gr/eidisi/politiki/332469/synthimata-kai-graffiti-gia-na-min-meinei-anapantito-egklima-tis-pyloy-foto>

What's more, the analysis of linguistic landscapes contributes to the understanding of the visibility and vitality of minority or endangered languages, strengthening efforts for their preservation and revival (Gorter, et al. 2019, Laudry & Bourhis 1997). Figures 17 and 18 show that the native languages Welsh and Tsakonian respectively reflect the intention of the populations of the regions to preserve these languages. In fact, in the case of the second sign,

Tsakonian is preceded by Modern Greek and is written in yellow as all the place names written in the first language on the road signs in the Greek territory.

FIGURE 17



Road Sign in English and Welsh © The Guardian

FIGURE 18



Road Sign in Tsakonian and Modern Greek © 2019 Explore South Kynouria

CONCLUSION

The ongoing social, political, and economic changes have brought about population movements and, thus, created multilingual and multicultural contexts, contributing to the

shaping of the LL of a region. Linguistic environments with emerging multilingual and multicultural communities, such as Greece, need to amplify linguistic landscape research in diverse contexts to enhance cultural awareness, visibility, and viability of minority languages and promote the agents' cultural identities. As the functional use of language in public spaces incorporates a symbolic value that reflects the social, cultural, and political identity of an area, the political power, language policy, and social dynamics are rendered visible through the analysis of LL, which offers a unique perspective in understanding the social structure of an area.

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