

XY Why is the visible recognition (e.g. road signs, etc.) of a minority language important?

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The visual representation of a language is part of the linguistic landscape. In most cases, it reflects the relative power and status of different languages. The linguistic landscape of a territory can have an informational function and a symbolic function. The presence of a minority language and the way the language is made visible in the public space is important for minority language speakers: language use in official and private signage influences people’s perception of the status of different languages, and affects the speakers’ linguistic behaviour.

What does research tell us?

Current research on the linguistic landscape studies a wide variety and modes of visual language use (Shohamy & Gorter 2009). The term was first developed to study the ethnolinguistic vitality of French in Quebec (Laundry & Bourhis 1997). Later, Scollon and Scollon (2003) established the basic method for qualitative, geosemiotic research of inscriptions and signs. Its fundamental contribution to the sociolinguistic description of a given community, area or city has been to assess how different minority languages are displayed and interpreted in the linguistic landscape. Today research focus may be extended to digital platforms operated by public authorities: it can also provide valuable information on the visual representation of languages.

There are two important and interlinked approaches. For sociolinguists, it provides clues regarding possible differences between the official language policy (as reflected in street names, in the names of official buildings and administrative offices, etc. – that is, the “top-down” dimension of the policy), and the actual impact of

the policy on individuals’ use of languages, particularly in private language signs, which may or may not be regulated, depending on the case considered. If not, the use of various languages in commercial signage, which is visible in the public space, provides clues about a more “bottom-up” dimension, namely, what place the residents themselves assign to these languages. From a legal perspective, the “official” linguistic landscape (official toponymy, street names, the names of public buildings, etc.) can convey information about the norms regulating official signage as well as the implementation of those norms.

Both perspectives are useful for shedding light on the actual inclusion of minorities in society. In general (with the exception of territorial language regimes with sharply demarcated language regions, as in Switzerland) the national majority language is likely to be used more often in public sphere, even in areas where minorities live in large numbers, since in most cases the majority language enjoys a privileged status, and may even be the only one recognised as official. The legal status of a language is determining in this regard: official languages are expected to be used in public institutions and reflected on public signs (names of institutions, offices, etc.). In certain areas minority languages may be on an equal footing with majority language (e.g. in the region of South Tyrol in Italy).

States have considerable discretion in determining the rules of public language use. International human rights norms recognise the right to freely use one’s language both in written and in oral communication in the *private* sphere (ICPR Arts. 26-27). In the European context, treaties established under the auspices of the Council of



Europe such as, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) recognise the right of minority language speakers to use their language in private signs available to the public (FCNM Art. 11(2) and ECRML Art. 7(1)d). In certain circumstances, this right extends to the use of the minority language on official signs (FCNM Art. 11(3) and ECRML Art. 10(2)g respectively). Proper implementation of international norms on minority language use is essential in this regard, since signature and ratification is not always followed by corresponding governmental action.

Illustration and evidence

In areas where minority language is in official use, the implementation of existing laws will much likely be determining on linguistic landscape. A different situation arises in areas where minority language speakers live, but where their language is not in official use_ in such cases its visibility will depend much more on sociolinguistic factors (see illustrations).

Besides legal recognition, the socio-historical hierarchy of languages may play a role as well: a minority language that is an official national language in another state may be better represented, especially in border areas. Regional minority language speakers may face difficulties in seeking visual recognition of their ‘unique’ language. Moreover, the implementation of relevant legal regulation on the use of languages in the public space may differ according to the socioeconomic status of the speakers of these different languages. Not only what we see, but also what we don’t see may be informative, as e.g. Roma language may be less visible than other minority languages even in areas where all minority languages enjoy equal official recognition (see Bartha-Laihonen-Szabó 2013:14).

Left: bilingual signs without proper translation in Vojvodina, Serbia: Serbian Cyrillic, Serbian Latin and Hungarian inscription on the primary school of Belo Blato (Erzsébetlak), but without translation of school name and village name. Center: full bilingual sign at the Bolzano/Bozen railway station in Italy. Right: Bilingual signs of Dunajská Streda/Dunaszerdahely in Slovakia (different size and different colours applied, reflecting official language hierarchy)

Policy implications

The linguistic landscape is influenced by a complex interaction of social and legal factors and in most cases, specific policy action is needed in order to ensure the full implementation of legal provisions, and facilitate the use of minority languages in the public space. Such policy action needs to take into consideration the social context in which minority language speakers live. It is also important for policy action to be consistent. This sometimes means ring-fencing them from local political considerations, and recalling that budget constraints usually do not constitute convincing arguments against them (the additional costs of moving from unilingual to bilingual signage are usually minimal). New developments, especially public digital services shall be taken into consideration by policy makers as new areas where the equal representation of different languages can be easily realized without territorial constraints. The protection of a minority language through the adoption of public signage that makes it visible is promoted by international norms and may also lead to a better integration of minority and majority communities at local level. .

References and further reading

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