

Backhaus, Peter (2007) *Linguistic Landscapes. A Comparative Study of Urban Multilingualism in Tokyo*. Clevedon–Buffalo–Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd. Pp. x, 158.

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*Language is all around us in textual form as it is displayed on shop windows, commercial signs, posters, official notices, traffic signs, etc.*

Durk Gorter (2006c: 1)

*The city is a place of language contact.*

Peter Backhaus (2007: 1)

## **1. Introduction**

This book begins with a foreword by Bernard Spolsky, who states that Landry and Bourhis (1997) used the term *linguistic landscape* (LL) for the first time and defined it as follow: “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 LL of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (Landry and Bourhis 1997: 25).

The concept of LL has been used in several different ways: in a rather general sense for the description and analysis of the language situation in a certain country or for the presence and use of many languages in a larger geographic area (Gorter 2006c: 1). During the past decade an increasing number of researchers have started to investigate the language texts that are present in public space (see Gorter 2006a, Gorter 2006b to name just major contributions).

Backhaus focuses on urban language contact in the written medium: the languages of Tokyo’s signs. He aims to provide a first general introduction to the study of language on signs and shows what insights about multilingualism and language contact can be gained from this type of research. The book comprises six chapters. Following the main chapters, three short sections appear at the end of the book: appendix, references, and index.

## 2. A brief discussion on the semiotic background and terminology in LL research

In Chapter 2, *Semiotic Background and Terminology* (pp. 4–11), Backhaus provides the reader with a brief discussion on the etymology and varying usages of the recent term LL. He refers to the meanings of the term *sign* given by Soanes and Stevenson (2003: 1645), and draws readers' attention to the two notions:

1. Sign is an object, quality, or event whose presence indicates the probable presence or occurrence of something else (= the semiotic sign).
2. Sign is a notice on public display that gives information or instruction in a written or symbolic form (= the public sign).

Backhaus emphasizes that the semantic differences between the two types of signs are fundamental and uses the term *semiotic sign* as opposed to *public sign*. Public signs are a specific type of semiotic sign: the name of a company attached to the front of a building indicates 'This is the building of company X.' There are more parallels between semiotic and public signs (see pp. 5–6).

Analyzing Peircean theory and its related theories, Backhaus then addresses the complex task of defining a public sign. Referring to the working definition of the LL term given by Bourhis and Landry (1997: 25) and giving a detailed overview of recent studies on this notion, Backhaus concludes: "due to the distinctive semiotic features of language on signs ... it is reasonable to stick to the definition formulated by Landry and Bourhis rather than to expand the term to a hardly definable variety of other arenas of language use in the public sphere" (p. 10). Itagi and Singh (2002) make the distinction between 'linguistic landscape' and 'linguistic landscaping,' both abbreviated as *LL* and suggest that the gerund form means the planning and implementation of actions and place their results in noun form. Backhaus uses these terms as well, intending to provide valuable insights into the linguistic situation of Tokyo and a valuable synthesis of various aspects of multilingualism.

## 3. Earlier case-studies on LL

Chapter 3, *Previous Approaches to the LL: An Overview* (pp. 12–53) describes and evaluates previous research on signs in various places around

the world. Reviewing fundamental and pioneering works on LL, Backhaus shows their relation to one another. He finds out that the lack of a summarizing terminology has resulted in ignoring previous various studies. Conceptualizing and reviewing different linguistic groups, the author discusses language on signs in (officially) bi- and multilingual cities.

### **3.1 Brussels**

Backhaus considers Brussels to be a classical example of a bilingual city with a French-speaking Walloon majority and a Dutch-speaking Flemish minority. Here, the use of language varies geographically: the further to the north, the more Dutch on billboards (see Tulp 1978 for a detailed discussion). This tendency seems to be dominative in the past 30 years. For Wenzel (1996) the southern parts of the city are more French than bilingual. Backhaus offers that the strict division of the two languages in their written form is an expression of the continuing conflict between the two language groups. However, on the shop signs in the centre of Brussels, English is predominant at shops offering electronic products, while French is favoured in the domain of fashion.

### **3.2 Montreal**

Montreal is close to Brussels in its bilingual character. Here, native speakers of French prevail, at the same time being a linguistic minority in English-dominated Canada as a whole. Since the 1960s the political and legislative struggle has been imprinting on LL of the city. Results show that for signs of department stores, 90% were monolingual French whereas 39 was the per centage of monolingual French in the domain of hotels and restaurants (Monnier 1989). This leads the author to define language and community boundaries: French-speaking east of the island and the English-dominated west.

### **3.3 Jerusalem**

Present-day Jerusalem represents two relatively homogenous linguistic and religious settings, defined by demographic data as either: (1) the western

parts, where Hebrew-speaking groups are dominated, and (2) the eastern city sections including the Old City, which are inhabited mainly by Arab speakers. According to three different approaches (Rosenbaum et al. 1977; Spolsky and Cooper 1991; Ben-Rafael et al. 2004), the presence of Hebrew, Arabic and English in Jerusalem's LL is analysed. The main findings of these studies show notable differences between linguistic settings that are more apparent when comparing public and private signs, whereas English is perceived as a "neutral" language.

### **3.4 Ljouwert and Donostia**

Cenoz and Gorter (2006) compare two one-street-analyses conducted in two non-national regions in Europe, one in Friesland, Netherlands and the other in the Spanish Basque Country. These two regions share the common presence of an official minority language (Basque and Friesian) co-existing alongside official majority languages (Spanish and Dutch), with English as the international language. They notice a considerable difference in the use of the minority languages relative to their presence on signs and to the demographics of these language speakers. In Ljouwert, nearly half of the population speaks Frisian, yet the minority language figures on only 3% of the observed signs and is dominant in only 2% of the signs. In contrast, while about a third of the population in Donostia speaks Basque, the minority language is present in over 50% of the signs studied and predominant in 28% of them. The research is highly original in its conceptualization of empirical research and trilingual context of a regional language, a national language, and an international language.

### **3.5 Paris and Dakar**

Due to migration, these two places have become linguistically highly diversified places. While the multilingual French capital is a result of international migration, to Dakar, the multilingualism has been brought from the other parts of Senegal. Calvet's (1990, 1994) comparison of the two cities shows how LL can reflect the real linguistic situation in officially monolingual settings in Europe and Africa.

### **3.6 Lira Town**

Uganda has about 40 indigenous languages. Varieties of Lango summarised under the term of Lwo are used at lower primary school level and spoken by the majority of the population in Lira Town. English is the language of higher education. Observing a social dichotomy between official and local language, Reh (2004) presents the diachronic development of city's LL.

### **3.7 Hong Kong, Beijing, Vienna, Paris, Washington**

Comparing five street corners in Asia, Europe and the US, Scollon and Scollon (2003) distinguish four types of discourse in the urban space: (1) municipal regulatory discourses, (2) municipal infrastructural discourses, (3) commercial discourses, and (4) transgressive discourses. Produced by official organs, vehicular and pedestrian traffic signs, public notices, warnings and prohibitions, toponymic signs or inscriptions on utility poles are signs with municipal regulatory and infrastructural discourses. All sorts of shop signs and other identifications of businesses are subsumed as commercial discourses. The most usual example of transgressive signs is graffiti that intentionally or accidentally violate the conventional semiotics expected in a given place.

### **3.8 Rome**

Backhaus describes two different approaches to language in signs in Rome. He concludes that the growing use of English on signs is a result of a general proclivity.

### **3.9 Bangkok**

With a population (mostly native Thais) between six and ten million people, Bangkok exemplifies a city whose LL characterize Thai-English code-mixing.

### 3.10 Tokyo

Before giving an overview on previous studies of LL in Tokyo, Backhaus describes the Japanese writing system in detail: its complicated nature has been an important issue in LL research. Written Japanese is a combination of four scripts: Kanji, Hiragana, Katakana, and the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet. The author stresses the fact that the streets of Tokyo are a place of written language contact.

## 4. The main findings of the previous research

In Chapter 4, Summary (pp. 54–63) Backhaus underlines three questions: (1) LL by whom?, (2) LL for whom?, and (3) LL *quo vadis*? Discussing these questions one by one, he outlines a general framework for the study of language on signs. The first question divides signs into official and non-official items. There is the important relationship between the linguistic properties of a sign and the linguistic background of the sign writer. The second question concerns the readers of the signs: the targeted readership forms the multilingual nature of a sign. Finally, the third question provides the analysis of languages and scripts in contact.

In describing the methodology of the main studies reported here, Backhaus points out that there is a basic distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches. He concludes that research into LL is best suited to a sound methodology.

## 5. A look into the LL of Tokyo

In Chapter 5, Case Study: Signs of Multilingualism in Tokyo (pp. 64–140) Backhaus concentrates on his own corpus of 2444 multilingual signs recorded in 28 survey areas. He starts out with the primary research questions and dedicates a major section of this chapter to the clear determination of the methodology. Describing the survey areas, counting the items and distinguishing between monolingual and multilingual signs, he then describes the basic results.

Following Landry and Bourhis (1997: 26–27), Backhaus classifies all government-related signs (mainly by the ward administration, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, or an agency of the national government) as top-down signs. All other signs he considers to be bottom-up signs.

Whereas English tends to appear more frequently on bottom-up signs, Japanese is predominantly found on top-down signs: it is present in over 97% of the cases.

Although Tokyo is a largely monolingual society with only 3.6% registered foreign residents, the city presents a surprisingly multilingual landscape. Then, Backhaus answers to the question of whether a given sign in the streets of Tokyo is multilingual more with regard to people with non-Japanese backgrounds or more with regard to the Japanese host population. Borrowing terms from the musicology, he refers to this problem as *part writing*. Transferring the notions ‘monophonic,’ ‘homophonic’ and ‘polyphonic’ to language on signs, the author distinguishes equivalent categories:

1. Signs that display texts constituting a complete translation (or transliteration) of each other are *homophonic* signs;
2. In a *mixed* part writing style only content elements of a sign are available in two or more languages;
3. Signs with several languages that do not constitute mutual translations are *polyphonic* in style;
4. Signs with only one language are *monophonic* signs.

Backhaus decides that whenever a translation or transliteration is available, the sign has been designed in a multilingual format with people of foreign backgrounds in mind (true for homophonic and most mixed signs), whereas the absence of translation or transliteration means that the sign is a multilingual sign made for the Japanese population (a case for polyphonic and monophonic signs). Going deeper in his analysis, Backhaus determines code preference—Japanese—for 1311 items of total 1479 classified as homophonic or mixed signs. He gives a correlation between code preference and the top-down/bottom-up variable: marked code preference is a distinctive feature of non-official signs. Only six of 662 official signs display a language other than Japanese in prominent position. Thus, the analysis of code preference (through order and size) confirms a clear predominance (99.1%) of Japanese on official signs. On the other hand, non-official signs show a greater variety of languages on their multilingual signs and less than 60% of them contain Japanese. These differences are

interpreted as follow: signs of a non-official nature desire giving an impression of foreignness—real or fake. The author notes two ways, in which multilingual information on signs can come: (1) one sign contains two or more languages (thus, the multilingual nature of sign is visible at first sight), or (2) several signs contain one language each. Determining the frequency of non-visible multilingual signs in the 28 survey areas, in the course of his survey Backhaus also recorded Japanese-only signs that were not classified as multilingual but that had corresponding multilingual counterparts with the same design. It turned out that visible multilingual signs are a rather exceptional sight in Tokyo. The majority of the 28 items found to display their contents in separate frames were attached not too far from each other and facing the same direction.

Comparing multilingual signs in Tokyo and Brussels, Backhaus concludes that while in the latter the separation of the two languages can be interpreted as an expression of lingering linguistic conflict between Flemish and Walloons, the appearance of several languages within the same frame does not cause any problem in Tokyo. According to the author's findings a considerable number of signs containing languages other than Japanese address a predominantly Japanese readership. The use of multilingualism on signs is highly appreciated.

As linguistic idiosyncrasies in English, Japanese, Chinese and Korean constitute an integral part of the corpora, Backhaus examines and classifies them. In practice, English is frequent in idiosyncrasies and can be observed in the orthographic (both graphemic and phonemic) as well as morphosyntactic and lexical level. There are a lot of examples that from a formal point of view (script and spelling) look English, whereas functionally (context) make sense when read as Japanese.

Japanese language on signs exhibit two forms of idiosyncrasies concerning: (1) the use of Braille, and (2) the transliteration of Japanese terms into the Roman alphabet. Code- and script-mixing is very usual on the lexical level.

Chinese and Korean are very different from each other with regard to graphic idiosyncrasies. While most texts of the sample classified as Chinese are written in short-style characters, Korean texts on the signs of the sample remain virtually unaffected. Official sign writers are more careful with Chinese script.

Backhaus assumes that idiosyncrasies in English and Chinese are indicative of a sign writer of Japanese origin. According to him, the



possibility that Korean texts are written exclusively by people of Korean origin is very high.

Taking an apparent-time look at Tokyo's LL, the author uses the term *layering* for the coexistence of older and newer versions of a given type of sign. Analyzing instances of layering, Backhaus takes four important aspects into account: (1) number of languages and scripts contained, (2) amount of foreign language information, (3) occurrence of idiosyncrasies, and (4) proportion of languages and scripts. It is obvious that number of languages and scripts has been increasing. At the same time, while in most cases all necessary directions are available in Japanese and English, there are bilingual versions of the sign that are not particularly helpful to people who know the latter but not the former. The amount of English has been decreasing in linguistic idiosyncrasies. The proportion of languages and scripts on signs has been changing also: the letters that once used to abbreviate a Japanese term now are reinterpreted as referring to English terms.

## 6. Evaluation

Lastly, Chapter 6, Conclusion (pp. 141–146) offers answers on the three questions previously raised in Chapter 4: (1) LL by whom?, (2) LL for whom?, and (3) LL *quo vadis*?. Although these considerations reflect the findings of the study once more, this section introduces, in brief, recent developments in Tokyo's LL.

This book is a welcome and useful addition to the study of LL, particularly for its contribution of well needed empirical studies. It shows how rich empirical data on the use of language on signs can be. This study discusses a number of major distinctions, such as official and non-official signs, code preference, visibility and non-visibility of a sign, and idiosyncrasies.

Overall, the research on Tokyo's LL is precise in its definition and classification of empirical analysis, well-informed with regards to all categories analyzed and methodologically thorough. It is commendable that Backhaus uses both qualitative and quantitative methods in such detail in his research of Tokyo's LL. This comparative study on language on signs is a valuable contribution to the field of multilingualism and language contact research.

To finish this review, the following quote by Backhaus was chosen to describe the challenges that LL can offer for future research:

The city is a place of language contact, (...) the signs in public space are the most visible reminder of this. LL not only tells you in an instant where on earth you are and what languages you are supposed to know, but it (...) provides a unique perspective on the coexistence and competition of different languages and their scripts, and how they interact and interfere with each other in a given place. (Backhaus 2007: 145.)

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