

KEY CONCEPTS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS/CONCEPTOS CLAVE DE LA LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA

Linguistic landscapes

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1. Introduction

Today, public spaces are increasingly dominated by visual information, and there is a great density of signs in shopping streets, commercial and industrial areas, and along roads, particularly near urban centres. Almost all these signs incorporate some form of language in textual form on shops, advertisements, posters, notices, warnings, and street name signs.

The study of linguistic landscapes is recognised as one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding fields within applied linguistics and sociolinguistics (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024a, 2025). A growing number of researchers are focusing on analysing 'language on signs' in public spaces, predominantly in urban environments. While the analysis of signs has a long tradition in semiotics and

advertising, academic research into linguistic landscapes is a relatively recent development. Its origins can be traced back to the 1970s, but the most substantial advancements have occurred in recent decades. Linguistic landscape has evolved into a unique field of study, offering novel and distinct insights into a wide array of phenomena related to languages in public spaces.

The exponential growth of this field is clearly indicated by the dramatic increase in publications. For instance, an exhaustive inventory by Backhaus (2007) listed only 30 publications until 2006 but Troyer's bibliography (2025) contains 2041 references. This expansion is not limited to the sheer number of publications but also extends to its geographic reach, encompassing case studies from all continents. While linguistic landscapes are primarily investigated in urban settings, rural areas have also been included in studies, such as those in South Africa, The Gambia, Sámi villages inside the Arctic Circle in Northern Europe, and along country roads in Scotland, Italy, and Finland (see Gorter & Cenoz, 2024a).

This boom in linguistic landscape publications covers a wide spectrum of themes, issues, and dimensions, generating innovative investigations and fresh perspectives. Key themes explored include multilingualism, education, minority languages, the role of English, language policy, conflict and contestation, the effects of globalisation in world-cities, social processes like gentrification, and specific linguistic features like typography and creativity.

The scope of linguistic landscape studies is extensive, covering numerous areas. In this article, we will focus on its definition and scope and then focus on multilingualism and the application of linguistic landscape in education.

2. Definition and scope

The most widely cited definition of the linguistic landscape was given by Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25) "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". This definition refers to several types of signs, but many others can be added such as posters, stickers, and newly created sign-types based on technological developments such as flat-panel displays, video walls, and touch screens. Over the past decade, the definition of linguistic landscapes has expanded beyond written texts to include images, objects, placement in time and space, and also how people interact with signage (Shohamy, 2019). For most researchers, the core concern remains the analysis of visible language displays on public signs even if multimodal, semiotic, visual, and sometimes oral elements are also included.

The linguistic landscape offers valuable information about language use on signs and can provide relevant sociolinguistic information. For example, the linguistic landscape can reflect the relative power and prestige of languages in a given context. The dominant language of an area is typically more common in official and commercial signage, while minority languages are generally less prevalent. The linguistic landscape can reveal discrepancies between official, top-down language policies such as street names or public announcements, and private, bottom-up signs in shops, posters, or protest signs. The linguistic landscape is an additional source of information that can provide deeper insights into sociolinguistic contexts and can also influence individuals' perception of language prestige and linguistic practices.

The study of linguistic landscapes applies diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives. Its multifaceted nature attracts researchers from a broad range of disciplines and given their different approaches, it is not surprising that there is not a dominant theoretical framework or one standardised research method in linguistic landscape studies.

Academic interest in issues of multilingualism, multiculturalism, multimodality, and diversity is growing across

fields like applied linguistics and sociolinguistics. Linguistic landscape studies offer an additional lens for understanding language in society and this perspective has gained acceptance as a specialised area within these disciplines (Kallen, 2023).

3. Multilingualism and education

Linguistic landscape studies, which examine the visibility and salience of languages in public and commercial spaces, have consistently focused on multilingualism as one of the central themes. Public signage displays the diversity of languages present within a given area. It is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to find a substantial sample of signage from any shopping street globally that contains only one language. Globalization reflected in the spread of English and the widespread distribution of commercial and cultural products, facilitated by advancements in long-distance transport and high-speed internet communications, have contributed to diversity. Other important factors are the large migratory flows, the use of minority languages in the public space, and the use of foreign brand names or shop names in different languages. Even in contexts where English is the dominant language, traces of other languages are still commonly observed in the linguistic landscape.

Studies of linguistic landscapes are particularly revealing when they address issues of multilingualism, linguistic variation, and the dynamics of language contact and conflict. In fact, linguistic landscape studies offer valuable avenues for discovering patterns in language diversity and for gaining a deeper understanding of multilingualism. The linguistic landscape is also a powerful tool for developing language awareness (Cenoz & Gorter, 2024a) . It helps students connect multilingualism and linguistic diversity to historical, social, and political contexts. Studying the linguistic landscape in an educational setting deepens students' understanding of values, identities, ideologies, and cultures. By reflecting on the

languages present in signs, students not only expand their knowledge of languages in general but also develop a greater appreciation for linguistic diversity, multilingualism, and the societal issues and ideologies they represent.

An early example showing the benefits of a linguistic landscape project to develop linguistic awareness with schoolchildren in Canada is reported by Dagenais et al. (2009). The results of this study highlight the relevance of the linguistic landscape for teaching about language diversity, multilingualism, and critical literacy practices and show how children can develop a better understanding of their socio-political context. Clemente et al. (2012) carried out a similar project with school children in Aveiro (Portugal) and highlighted the importance of understanding attitudes toward diversity and multilingualism, and how linguistic landscape can promote civic engagement and critical education.

Linguistic landscape can also be useful to develop awareness of language diversity at higher education levels. Gorter & Cenoz (2024b) asked master students enrolled in the *European Master in Multilingualism and Education* at the University of the Basque Country to collect and analyse data from public spaces in their surroundings. The outcomes of this study showed that students increased their language awareness, enhanced their understanding of language diversity, and developed critical awareness. Many students noted a significant shift in their perception, stating that they had not paid much attention to the linguistic landscape previously, but now could "look at signs through a different lens". The study confirmed that linguistic landscape is a powerful pedagogical tool, beneficial for students of various ages.

The "LoCALL Local Linguistic Landscapes for Global Language Education in the School Context" project is another example of how linguistic landscapes can serve to promote greater awareness of languages and a critical view of existing inequalities and hierarchies (Melo-Pfeiffer, 2023; Andrade et al., 2024). The project, carried out in five European countries, encourages future

teachers to observe, explore, and appreciate language use in multilingual settings.

The linguistic landscape can also be a powerful pedagogical tool, offering interesting, relevant, motivating, and innovative approaches to language learning and teaching (Gorter, 2018; Krompák et al., 2022; Gorter & Krompák, 2024). Although signs are not primarily designed for language teaching, they can lead to incidental learning, as passers-by notice texts and visuals in public spaces, which are often the result of significant investments in the advertisement industry. Cenoz & Gorter (2008) showed the relevance of the linguistic landscape for Second Language Acquisition by providing authentic, contextualised input for learners and highlighted its potential for developing vocabulary and pragmatic competence.

Linguistic landscape can also be useful to develop metalinguistic awareness in the context of the pedagogical translanguaging approach (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). Leonet et al. (2020, 2021) explain an intervention consisting of various activities in the language classes for Basque, Spanish and English over a period of two school years in the last two years of primary school. One of the units focused on linguistic landscape and students' analysed cognates, compounds, and derivatives found on signs so as to promote their deeper metalinguistic understanding. Students' feedback from this unit showed that the linguistic landscape was useful both for their metalinguistic and linguistic awareness and their vocabulary in the three languages (see also Gorter et al., 2022).

Another dimension of the study of the linguistic landscape, multilingualism and education is the schoolscape, that is the study of the linguistic landscape inside schools. Schoolscapes can reflect the language policy and language use of the school and can also be used for learning purposes (Gorter, 2018). The linguistic landscape within educational institutions, shares similarities with public linguistic landscapes but also exhibits distinct characteristics, such as the frequent presence of student-produced, less professional signs.

Another difference is that the languages in schoolsapes can reflect the specific language policy of the schools and the degree of multilingualism can be different from the public space.

Gorter & Cenoz (2015) conducted an explorative study in multilingual Basque schools and identified nine distinct functions of signs in schoolsapes: school management (e.g., indicating locations), classroom management (e.g., rules about how to behave inside the class), teaching subject content or language (e.g., instructional phrases), teaching values (e.g., anti-smoking messages), developing intercultural awareness (e.g., 'welcome' in multiple languages), promotion of the Basque language (e.g., revitalisation efforts), announcing collective events (e.g., theatre plays, cultural promotions), provision of commercial information (e.g., education-related advertisements), and decoration (e.g., student artwork). This list of functions is considered open-ended, with other studies adding categories such as commemorative plaques, certificates, graffiti, and health and safety information (see for example Karafylli & Maligkoudi, 2023).

The visibility of minority languages in schoolsapes is also important for promoting language awareness in educational contexts. Sullón-Acosta (2024) conducted a study of indigenous languages in schoolsapes in the context of Intercultural Bilingual Education in 25 schools in Peru. The schools aim at using Quechua or other indigenous languages and their language policy promotes the use of spaces for the indigenous languages. The results of the study indicate that indigenous languages are part of the schoolsapes inside the classrooms and that in some schools they are used for teaching subject content and language but in other schools their function is only decoration. Sullón-Acosta also observed that the indigenous languages were not in the schoolsapes near the management offices or in the courtyard. The importance of schoolsapes to promote learning of content and language was also reported in a study on indigenous languages in Oaxaca (Mexico) by Córdova-Hernández (2024).

4. Summary and conclusion

Linguistic landscape studies have rapidly emerged as a dynamic and expanding field within applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, demonstrating exponential growth in publications and global reach in the last decades. The field offers unique insights into languages as they appear in public spaces, exploring a wide spectrum of themes, including multilingualism, education, minority languages, language policy, and the effects of globalisation. The multidisciplinary nature of research on linguistic landscapes contributes to its diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives, without a single dominant framework.

Linguistic landscape studies can provide interesting insights to understand and develop language awareness regarding multilingualism and language diversity. Moreover, the perception and reflection about signs in public spaces can serve as an educational tool in school contexts.

The linguistic landscape is also a powerful pedagogical tool for language learning and teaching, providing authentic, contextualised input that aids in developing vocabulary and pragmatic competence. Furthermore, it contributes to the development of metalinguistic awareness, particularly through pedagogical translanguaging approaches, enhancing students' understanding of linguistic structures and vocabulary across multiple languages. A distinct, yet related, dimension is the study of schoolsapes, which specifically examines the linguistic landscape within educational institutions. Schoolsapes reflect a school's language policy and language use and they often exhibit different degrees of multilingualism compared to public spaces. The functions of signs in schoolsapes are diverse, ranging from school and classroom management to teaching subject content and values, developing intercultural awareness, and promoting minority languages. Studies on indigenous languages in Peruvian and Mexican schoolsapes, for instance, underline their importance for promoting language awareness and supporting language education,

even if their functional presence can vary from direct teaching to mere decoration.

In conclusion, linguistic landscape studies provide vital insights for comprehending the relationship between language, society, and public space. Its powerful and proven application in diverse educational contexts—from fostering general language awareness and critical thinking to supporting specific language learning and metalinguistic development—demonstrates its pedagogical value, offering rich, contextualised resources for exploring multilingualism and linguistic diversity in an increasingly globalised world.

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