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Linguistic landscapes and the navigation of new settings: A phenomenological self-study of signage on my first trip abroad and implications for teaching literacy

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"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

-Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad*

Introduction

Landry and Bourhis (1997) are credited with coining the term *linguistic landscapes*, a term which they defined as "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings [combined] to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration" (p. 25). The "linguistic landscape serves to inform in-group and out-group members of the linguistic characteristics, territorial limits, and the language boundaries of the region they have entered" (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25). Practically speaking, linguistic landscapes offer helpful information to navigate our surroundings and meet our needs. In teaching practice, we might refer to this type of text as *environmental print*. I explored the linguistic landscapes of three unfamiliar countries during a forty-five-day summer research and leisure trip. I acknowledge travel of any kind is a privilege, and international travel in particular offers opportunities to expand our own viewpoints and explore unfamiliar cultures. On this trip, I attended to my experience travelling internationally with a focus on how I made sense of unfamiliar settings and languages.

I took a phenomenological approach to this self-study (Patton, 1990) to gain a holistic and inductive understanding of the information I utilized from signs to navigate the cities I visited. As this was my first time outside of the United States and I spent the majority of my trip alone, I had a heightened awareness of the signs around me and their physical contexts because I had to meet my basic needs and wants for food, transit, and activity in these foreign settings. I photographed the signs, symbols, and images around me I utilized to meet these needs. I considered how the linguistic landscapes I saw in my travels influenced my perception of each place. When I returned home, I analyzed the photographic data for patterns, commonalities, and dissimilarities to begin to understand what information I gained from the signs, how I used the information in visual images to meet my needs, and what skills I used to acquire this information.

My interest in this study was sparked by my attention to the kinds of skills I needed to make my trip safe and productive. For me, signage in foreign cultures became a tool for cross-cultural navigation and understanding other ways of living. My goal is to offer a critical look at how I utilized linguistic landscapes to navigate unfamiliar surroundings. I believe the implications of this study could ultimately

influence visual literacy instruction in a way that may help tie in-school teaching to an enriching life outside of school. This knowledge could help teachers better prepare their students to navigate the linguistic landscapes of foreign cultures, making international travel a conceivable option for students while developing visual intelligence, which has been said to increase “the effect of human intelligence” and “extend the creative spirit” (Dondis, 1973, p. 185). Alternately, the points and counterpoints I share here may help to inform teachers of ways in which we might support students coming to our classrooms from other countries and/or students who are learning the dominant language of our classrooms. My photographs and discussion are framed to emphasize ways we may de-center our own experience of our surroundings and ultimately making the familiar less familiar to better understand multiliteracy practices. As Gorter stated, “the attention to the linguistic landscape in an educational context provides a promising way to teach about language awareness and literacy practices” (2013, p. 203).

A Brief Review of the Literature

As I reviewed the literature, I considered my positionality as an American visitor and education researcher in England, Finland, and France. I reviewed the literature in the field of linguistic landscapes and international tourism. de Botton (2002) provides insight as to why linguistic landscapes are often conducted from an outsider perspective, noting linguistic landscapes do not seem distinctive to the casual eye; they are noted when signs appear in a form that would “never exist in precisely this form in [one’s] own country” (as cited in Jaworski, 2010, p. 9-10). The visual messages of linguistic landscapes become so much a part of the scenery of a place, making note of the message becomes an unconscious everyday activity to the insider (Sayer, 2010). The spaces, places, topics, and lenses varied greatly among the studies I reviewed. Wetzel (2010) questioned authorship and intended audience through examination of Japanese signs as narratives. She viewed the images and text of public advertising and informational signs and found them to be useful in examining everyday life in Japan. Sayer (2010) described the extensive use of English on signs in a community in Mexico to identify the social significance it carries within the community. He found English was often used because it was seen as sophisticated, fashionable, cool, sexy, an expression of love, and a means to express subversive identities. Lou (2012) looked closely at the signage of Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown and how the superficial inclusion of Chinese script as per law shaped the production and consumption of this text. She found the Chinese text was not relevant to the lives of the city’s inhabitants, as they do not engage with it on a day-to-day basis. Barrs (2011) studied the use of the English language in Japanese public and private signage. He encourages teachers to attend to signage to help students ‘unlock’ the code of English embedded in the native Katakana script. Jaworski (2010) examined postcards from around the world for

the sense of place portrayed to tourists through linguistic landscapes. He looked at the interplay of text and images and how they engage the attention of viewer and portray it in a positive light to encourage travel to the destination. Researchers addressed informational aspects of the signs they examined as necessary and tended to focus on signs for their symbolic functions, as in Lou's (2012) study of Washington D.C.'s Chinatown, Wentzel's (2010) study of Japanese signs as narrative, or Sayer's (2010) study of English in Mexico. They investigated linguistic landscapes which were largely defined by their symbolic functions in discourses of power and cultural identity. Informational functions may include basic communication and the obtainment of services. The focus of Jaworski's (2010) work could be interpreted as informational, as he analyzed post cards for their sense of place.

In the last decade, much of the research in the field has turned to exploration of political power in linguistic landscapes by examining the language of dominance in particular regions and studying cultural identities in relation to linguistic landscapes (e.g., Bruyèl-Olmedo & Juan-Garau, 2015; Yan, 2019; Calvi & Uberti-Bona, 2020). Lomicka and Ducate's (2021) study of tech-mediated meaning-making in a study abroad experience for students indicated attention to linguistic landscapes made students more aware of their surroundings and helped them to develop a sense of cultural awareness.

The research literature informed several of my decisions in my own study of linguistic landscapes and prepared me to take my own photographs of signs. The analysis of linguistic landscapes for their symbolic functions was beyond the scope of my historical and cultural understanding of the countries I visited. I focused on linguistic landscapes mainly for their informational functions, as this function mirrored my use of signs throughout my travels. The literature also brought to my attention issues regarding the unit of analysis for this study. According to Huebner (2008), the literature has yet to clearly define a unit of analysis. A 'sign' could be defined by its text, images, text and images, size, message, or even through its surrounding visual context. As I selected scenes and composed photographs as well as possible while maintaining an alertness to my surroundings, I included the contexts I thought necessary to balancing scale, detail, and content as best I could. Lou (2012) builds a detailed triadic model of place, consisting of spatial representation, material space, and spatial practice. Lou's model proved useful in my analysis of the informational functions of linguistic landscapes I observed. Lou sees the study of linguistic landscapes as a spatial representation on the surface of a place; an explicit lens for interpretation of signs that incorporate language as semiotics, language as action, and language as capital.

Huebner (2008) raises questions of agency and intended audience, questions closely related to Landry and Bourhis's (1997) symbolic function of signs, situations motivated by political change or political control. Often in the literature,

signs are viewed as top-down (created by an authority; i.e. Government or corporation) or bottom-up (created by the community or members of the public). This way of thinking is useful theoretically but becomes less effective in practice as the system is socially constructed and can vary dependent upon point of view. It raises questions for me about my distinctions in inclusion and exclusion criteria for my photographs in this study, as I recognize the interpretation of signs may never be purely for informational or symbolic functions, top-down or bottom-up. One function informs the other and vice versa.

Data Collection

Because this was my first travel abroad, I entered each new territory with an inexperienced view of its linguistic landscape. I took a phenomenological approach to this study (Patton, 1990) as my aim was to gain a holistic and inductive understanding of the information I gained from the signs in these cities. I documented what I saw and how I used it to find my way in new cities through photographs of signs. In this study, Charles S. Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Roland Barthes helped me to see images, sounds, and words, as examples of signifiers (as cited in Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). The meaning of those signifiers is the signified. The signifier and signified form the ‘sign’ (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 29). My definition of ‘signs’ evolved to include visible texts and their immediate surroundings. I found my definition of ‘texts’, though broad from the beginning, expanded throughout my journey and subsequent analysis as I considered signifiers, the signified, and the contexts of signs I discovered. During my forty-five days in Europe, I traveled to each of my destinations for varied lengths of time. I have included a timeline of my trip, as each destination brought new challenges and new insights (see Figure 1). I focused on signs for their informational value. I used the signs in my destinations to navigate cities that were completely new to me (e.g., London, Helsinki, Paris) and in some instances, the linguistic landscapes were comprised of languages that were also largely unfamiliar (e.g., British English, Finnish, Swedish, French).

I took pictures of the public signage and visual imagery I used to help me navigate new spaces. Naturally, I did not photograph every sign and symbol I used to acquaint myself with new cities. I took photographs out of both necessity and practicality. I did not put myself in undue danger to take a photo by stopping in the middle of a crowded sidewalk or busy intersection. My goal was not to call attention to myself as a visitor. I took all photographs with my iPhone, as it was lightweight, portable, and less obtrusive than a separate camera. At the end of my six and a half weeks abroad, I had nearly 1500 photographs of sights and signs.



Figure 1- A timeline of my trip

Analysis

To begin my analysis process, I considered what happened during my days abroad, using the photographs as visual cues. Day-to-day activities were mainly concerned with meeting three broad and basic needs in each unfamiliar place: food, transit, and activity. Every leg of the trip was arranged ahead of time, so finding a place to stay each night was not a concern. Lou's (2012) triadic model of place (material space, spatial practice, and spatial representation) helped me to understand components of each of the categories of my photos and begin to sort my photos. Lou (2012) sees the study of linguistic landscapes as a spatial representation on the surface of a place, an explicit lens for interpretation of signs incorporating three perspectives in sociolinguistic research: "language as sign and semiotic system; language as action and practice; and language as resource and capital" (p. 39). After initial sorting of my photos based on my needs the signs helped me meet, I reexamined the photos with Lou's frameworks in mind. I made sense of the patterns in my photographed images by forming broad categories based on Lou's framework (i.e., signs in material space, signs in action or practice, and signs as resource or capital) in order to reflect deeply on what I saw in my photographs and how I used the information from the signs.

As I examined the signs I used to meet my basic need for food, I could often situate my thoughts within Lou's model of language as action. Meeting this need for food most often required me to interact with a vendor, waiter, or cashier. Even self-selected purchases at a market required two-way communication with a cashier

with whom I may or may not have shared a spoken language. In order to make decisions about my meals, I had to actively engage with the signs and people around me, weighing nutritional value, taste, and budget criteria (See Figure 2).



Figure 2 - one of my favorite places for a treat in Cambridge, England

I found much evidence of Lou's (2012) frame of language as a semiotic system in analyzing photos of my basic need for transit. Whether or not I understood the written language, the sign systems on public signs helped me to navigate in these new spaces. When making decisions about transit, I generally considered ease of navigation and safety. I had to understand not only where I was but how to get where I wanted to go. Travel was not only about being in an unfamiliar place but the act of navigation to get to the next unfamiliar place. Though these are complex ideas, paper and online maps helped me to decide how I would travel and made the process concrete, which, in turn helped me to negotiate the unfamiliar semiotics of the language and spatial characteristics of transit. Even when the language of maps and signs was not familiar to me, I relied on how the words looked, where the sign was positioned, and cues from surrounding signifiers. Figure 3 shows a road sign in Helsinki. Though I did not heavily rely on the pronunciation or meaning of the words on the sign, I depended upon the way the words appeared visually and their immediate surroundings as a marker for finding the way back to my hostel.



Figure 3 - a street sign in Helsinki, Finland

Through my activities in each of these cities, from sightseeing to visiting cultural events, I gained an appreciation for the sense of place in each territory. I wanted to be able to answer the question, “What is it like there?” when I talked to my friends and family about the trip. I balanced my activity choices with interest and cost. Often, my activities consisted of a self-guided walking tour. Along the way, I photographed signs and sights which helped me to develop a sense of each place I visited. In my analysis, I focused on these ideas with Lou’s concept of language as resource and capital in mind. In this way, the distinct architecture of broadly defined signs (i.e. buildings, public art, traffic patterns, in addition to road signs and advertisements) in each area contributed to my development of sense of place. For example, in Paris, while out walking, I developed a sense that this city values detail and intricacies. I photographed a lamppost on a bridge (see Figure 4). Decorative features like these are not uncommon in Paris. I saw these ‘everyday’ works of art as cultural resource and capital in this linguistic landscape that communicated a sense of place.



Figure 4 - a lamppost on a bridge in Paris, France

While analyzing my photographs and reflecting on the trip, I thought about my use of literacy skills visible in the photographs but less explicit (i.e., beyond the surface of the image in a photograph). I used financial literacy skills to think differently about currency. I was reminded of this by the photos of menus and advertisements. I also had to consider my sense of spatial awareness and culturally literacy within these contexts.

Findings

Meeting my basic needs of food, transit, and activity in these new territories required knowledge of written language, images, oral language, spatial cues, and cultural gestures, among other skills. In each city I visited, at minimum, I had to make purchases at a market, occasionally ask for directions, and do something outside of my room when I had spare time.

Buying food in each of these new settings necessitated active mental engagement from me in order to weigh nutritional value and cost. In the markets where I shopped, I was required to scrutinize packaging and food labels for words and images in order to meet nutritional requirements. Shelf placement of products in markets helped me understand what might be inside the food packages I bought. Dairy products were in a refrigerated section, tea and coffee were situated in an aisle together. Though the items in the produce section were a bit easier to distinguish, I had to think of price in pounds or euros per kilograms, two systems of measurement not local thoughts. At restaurants or food carts, I used other-than-text signs to determine what I would have. For example, Figure 5 shows one example of a meal I ate in Cambridge, England. The term ‘pasty’ was new to me, but having the food displayed in the window along with signage describing fillings and prices, I was able to gain a sense of what the food might taste like and what kind of nutritional value it may have.



Figure 5 - the window of a pasty shop in Cambridge, England

In all three countries, I used public transportation. The knowledge it takes to read a map is not the same as the knowledge it takes to find the way to a destination using public transportation. I live in a region where most people (myself included) drive their own cars. Adjusting to a lifestyle in walkable cities with reliable, useful, and convenient public transit required me to understand maps in a different way. In past domestic travels, I was able to use an application on my phone to help me map my route. But I did not have international phone service, so my apps were not live. I had to plan ahead and take screenshots of the maps and schedules I needed (See Figure 6).

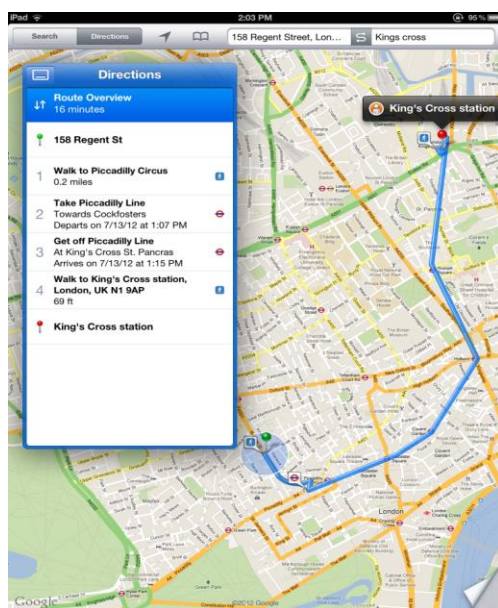


Figure 6 - a screenshot of my route for use without cellular service

In England and France, I rode underground trains several times while my train in Finland only traveled above ground. In my experience in prior domestic travels, I have noted my sense of direction is stronger if I do not have to go underground for transportation (i.e. Chicago's elevated train system is less difficult for me to navigate than New York City's subways). Gaining a sense of direction after coming up from underground can be challenging in a new city and a strong sense of direction, a knowledge of the area and/or cross streets, a compass, or a map may be necessary to continue navigation. A person who uses public transportation in their home city may not find this as challenging. Regardless of experience, I utilized signage and other cues from my landscape to translate my map screenshot to navigate three-dimensional space.

When choosing an activity, I generally looked for my plans to be inexpensive and interesting to me. Though I had guidebooks for all of my destinations, I relied often on found advertisements for shows, events, and museums to guide my decisions for planned leisure activities. In Cambridge, I saw posters all over town for the ‘Big Weekend’. As it was free and within three minutes walking distance from my residence, I attended.



Figure 7 - a advertisements for ‘The Big Weekend’ in Cambridge, England

Rethinking ‘Signs’ as a Sense of Place

I found my definition of ‘signs’ became broader during the collection and analysis process, as my definition of ‘texts’ expanded. I found myself taking photographs of trash bins. It was interesting to me how different garbage looked in different countries. I thought of garbage cans as a marker of a place. In Cambridge, trash bins were not hard to find. They were on nearly every corner. Often, after big events, the trash bins would overflow until they were emptied the next day. But, in London, there were nearly no trash bins to be found. The Olympics would be in London soon after my visit, and a conversation I had with a woman from Wales while we were waiting in line for my turn on the London Eye revealed the city had removed most public trash cans for security reasons, as they can be easy receptacles for bombs. People had begun making piles of garbage on the sidewalks. In Paris, I often found public trash receptacles in the form of transparent bags hanging from a

large metal ring attached to a pole (see Figure 8). I wondered if this was one possible solution to London's problem.



Figure 8 - a garbage bag in Paris, France

In Finland, I saw workers pick up trash with brooms and street sweepers. After the debris was gone, a machine washed the pavement. I took a photograph of the walkway just after the machine had cleared the area (Figure 9).



Figure 9 - a washed walkway outside of a shopping mall in Helsinki, Finland

It was interesting to me to see how different cities handled the universal human problem of waste disposal. During analysis of the photographs I took, I began to

understand that garbage looks different in diverse environments because it contains different components and is handled in different ways. I thought of trash as a text and therefore garbage (or lack thereof) in public spaces became part of my sense of each place.

My sense of gestural literacy (i.e., my ability to read body language) was tested in these new settings. In my hometown, people often smile and regard strangers in the street for seemingly no particular reason, for the sake of “southern hospitality.” In many of the cities I visited, smiles were not expressed as freely. In Helsinki, people were friendly and helpful, even in my passing conversations, but they seemed to reserve smiles for more personal exchange. I learned from a conversation with my friend that a smile to a stranger on the street in Paris could be received as an invitation for more than just an exchange of glances. I had to quickly learn my smiles in these foreign settings could be taken as signs with meaning I had not intended.

Apparent Symbolic Functions

In my casual look at the symbolic functions of signs, I found some obvious examples of signs with secondary authorship. I photographed signs in England, Finland, and France that visibly had more than one layer of authorship; signs that left questions in my mind about which author or voice is more visible. In Cambridge, near the community green space close to where I stayed, I found a sign advertising a charity fundraiser. On the sign, there was a sticker stating, “This charity does cruel tests on pigs. Do not support it. Support humane research.” (see Figure 10). Though I understood the issue on a surface level, I did not have access to the background of the charity or the opposing party who added the second layer of authorship.



Figure 10 - a sign near Parker's Piece, Cambridge, England

In Paris, I considered the meaning and authorship of a particular sign for an extended time (See Figure 11). Initially, I could not determine if there was a second layer of authorship or not, as the sign appeared cohesive. But, through conversation with a friend who lived in Paris, I learned a red circle with a horizontal white bar indicated drivers should not enter the roadway from that direction. With the addition of the stick figure who appears to be carrying the horizontal white rectangle, we could only guess at the meaning of the second layer of authorship, but nevertheless found the sign amusing.



Figure 11 - a sign near Notre Dame in Paris, France

In Helsinki, I came across a sign in which I did not understand either layer of authorship. I hypothesized the large blue “T” on the white background may have had to do with traffic patterns or parking because of its placement on a pole near the street, but I could not know for sure. The addition of the mustache to the sign struck me as humorous, but I could not access the underlying meaning behind the second layer of authorship either (See Figure 12). An internet search of the Finnish Transport Infrastructure Agency does not indicate a specific meaning for the unaltered sign.

Social Interaction and Linguistic Landscapes

In these three destinations, my social experiences were quite varied. By comparing components of my photographs across countries, I noted few of my photographs contain people I know. I realized how much my understanding of the linguistic landscapes around me were determined by my social interactions. In England, I traveled with a large group from my university, but my work was quite different from the work of others. I spent the majority of my time there alone. I attended several group activities and spent a few minutes each day at breakfast interacting with undergraduate students or the two supervising professors from my university, or a woman who worked at the bed and breakfast where we stayed.



Figure 12 - a sign in Helsinki, Finland

While I had one meeting scheduled with a researcher at the University of Helsinki, I was otherwise by myself on the trip. I had to order my own food, check out at the market, and occasionally ask for directions in a region where the official languages are Finnish and Swedish. Luckily for me, many people in Finland also speak English and were happy to talk with me to practice the language with a native English speaker. On the train to the airport, I spoke for some time with a man who was born in Finland. He helped me with my Finnish pronunciation of Helsinki's roadways from the map I had in my pocket. He spoke Finnish, Swedish, Russian, English, and Hebrew, highlighting for me another cultural difference in the value of being multilingual. My understanding of the signs in these places was largely dependent upon my singular interpretation and internet searches. In France, I stayed with a friend who lived in Paris and spent the majority of my time with her. She met me at the train station and gave me a guided tour for the week. She knows the roads and the language. I met some of her friends and I stayed in her neighbor's apartment. She explained signs to me while we were out in the city. Though I had less need to attend to signage in Paris, I learned more about the history and implications of signage throughout the city through conversation with my friend. My experience and degree of understanding of the signs around me largely depended upon my social interactions.

Discussion and Conclusions

In the shopping mall in Helsinki and the Metro in Paris, I encountered multimedia signs which will likely present new layers to the study of linguistic landscapes. At the shopping mall and the metro station, I saw signs with interactive touch screens (in Finnish, Swedish, and English in Finland and in French in France), providing consumers the opportunity to select the information provided by the sign, and blurring the lines of author and consumer. As more of these signs appear

worldwide, the study of linguistic landscapes will likely become more complex. Without a firmer hold on the basic theory and framing of linguistic landscapes, moving forward to study multimedia, multimodal, and multilingual signage is tenuous at best. Foundations in visual grammar (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), visual literacy (e.g. Averinou & Ericson, 1997; Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 2005), as well as new media literacies (e.g. The New London Group, 1996) may help to guide the field of linguistic landscapes to common ground for deeper discussion.

Implications for Classroom Practice

I thought about some of my former elementary-age students who had minimal leisure travel experiences, who had rarely or never taken trips to new cities. Reflecting on the ways in which my travel abroad served to transform my world view and open my life to new ways of living I had never considered, I wondered how students can gain the skills necessary to successfully engage with spaces foreign to them. I share these experiences with the hope teachers can draw on my findings to inspire students to create their own paths to meaningful experiences in unfamiliar spaces. If a goal of school is, in fact, “to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life” (New London Group, 1996, p. 60), then schools must work toward this goal by giving students the tools they need to navigate new surroundings. With knowledge of map skills, visual literacy skills, and spatial literacy skills, and an openness to cultural differences, could the prospect of international travel seem within reach for all students? My experience abroad also made me question what it means to be foreign. I also offer my experience as a way for teachers to help students who may see their classrooms as ‘foreign’, new, unfamiliar, or uncertain linguistic landscapes to successfully navigate their surroundings. My self-study supports Burwell and Lenters’ findings from their work with youth and indicate “the concept of linguistic landscapes fits especially well with a pedagogy of multiliteracies by encouraging the critical study of multimodality and linguistic diversity in context” (2015, p. 202).

Articulating my challenges and successes in new spaces from the standpoint of a learner may help teachers build environments and communities of practice in their classrooms to support students in learning to “do” school and life in unfamiliar settings (Lave & Wagner, 2003). Attention to the ways in which we make meaning from our surroundings may encourage students to approach new spaces with confidence and the skills to successfully navigate the unknown. Considering our surroundings in a new light may also support teachers to reconsider environmental print and linguistic landscapes in the classroom with a refreshed perspective, imagining what it may be like to encounter our own spaces as though we were navigating them for the first time.

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