



Sociolinguistic Variation in Urban Linguistic Landscapes

Edited by

Sofie Henricson, Väinö Syrjälä, Carla Bagna and Martina Bellinzona

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1. Introduction

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This book contributes to the multidisciplinary research field of linguistic landscape, henceforth LL, a field attracting increasing interest across countries as well as in various scientific disciplines such as linguistics, human geography and semiotics. It is a vibrant and steadily expanding research field, which is reflected in the many anthologies covering different topics and methodological approaches (e.g. Shohamy & Gorter 2009; Shohamy, Ben-Rafael & Barni 2010; Rubdy & Ben Said 2015; Blackwood, Lanza & Woldemariam 2016; Shohamy, Pütz & Mundt 2018). Previous LL research of special interest in this book includes but is not limited to the study of multilingualism and minority languages (e.g. Cenoz & Gorter 2006; Gorter 2006; Gorter, Marten & Mensel 2012; Hélot, Barni, Janssen & Bagna 2012), the omnipresence of English (e.g. Laitinen 2014; Lanza & Woldemariam 2014), and visibility of languages and ethnolinguistic vitality (e.g. Landry & Bourhis 1997; Barni & Bagna 2010; Vandenbroucke 2015), as well as papers offering theoretical and methodological reflections on LL research (e.g. Scollon & Scollon 2003; Spolsky 2009; Jaworski & Thurlow 2010; Barni & Bagna 2015; Blackwood 2015; Cresswell 2015; Gorter & Cenoz 2020).

LL is a relatively young research field that during the last decades has developed into an established field known by most linguists in the 2020s. Some studies in the 1970s and 1980s are often mentioned as early contributions to the field of linguistic landscape studies, but Landry & Bourhi's study from 1997 has however often been noted as a turning point, where after the field started growing exponentially. Today, in the early 2020s, LL is an established field that since 2015 has its own leading journal, *Linguistic Landscape: An international journal*, many sources describing its evolution and topical focal points (most recently Gorter & Cenoz 2023) and an extensive online bibliography (Troyer 2023) documenting its continuous expansion and growth. LL is a multidisciplinary field attracting not only linguists but also researchers in geography, sociology, economics and urban research, for example. Also within linguistics, which is the scope of the current volume, it informs research on a broad spectrum including sociolinguistics, language policy, multilingualism, contact linguistics, onomastics, language and gender studies, educational linguistics, and many other kinds of applied linguistics.

LL research nowadays incorporates a broad range of semiotic spaces, including but not restricted to buildings, tattoos, sounds and virtual spaces. Our prime focus

in this book is on physical urban spaces and their LLs but we approach these urban spaces through both physical and virtual data. Urban LLs include various publicly displayed signs ranging from official road signs, for example, to unofficial signs such as those authored by businesses or private individuals (e.g. Landry & Bourhis 1997; Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). Further, urban LLs also include unauthorised signs, such as graffiti on a park bench, placed in the public sphere without permission, or so-called transgressive signs (Scollon & Scollon 2003; Pennycook 2009). Unlike official signs authored by national or local authorities, LLs created by citizens are not as constricted by legislation and other regulations, nor do they necessarily adhere to linguistic policies or politically correct discourses.

More specifically, this book concerns urban LLs in different cities in northern and southern Europe (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Italy), and how they differ among urban areas with diverse profiles of linguistic and socioeconomic demographics, for example, or how they evolve as the city develops or in times of crisis. The common thread linking the chapters in this book is a mutual interest in sociolinguistic variation in the LLs of urban spaces. The authors approach this shared overarching interest by addressing a variety of questions, of which the following are central in all chapters:

- *How do different processes of the LLs create and reflect specific profiles and identities of urban districts?* This question is addressed by the chapters in this volume from different perspectives: in Chapter 2 from the point of view of the model reader, in Chapter 3 studying five urban centres in a multilingual Nordic region, in Chapter 4 with focus on names and place branding, in Chapter 5 through an analysis of activist discourses, in Chapter 6 from both a citizen and a researcher perspective, in Chapter 7 departing from commercial LLs of migration, in Chapter 8 exploring COVID-19 signscapes in two capital regions of the Nordic countries and in Chapter 9 by proposing a multifaceted methodological combination for the exploration of sociolinguistic variation in urban LLs.
- *What roles do different languages and discourses play in urban LLs?* The chapters discuss both highly monolingual (e.g. Chapter 2) and highly multilingual (e.g. Chapter 7) urban areas and touch upon a variety of central discourses highlighted in the urban districts in focus, such as commerciality (Chapter 3, Chapter 4, Chapter 6, Chapter 7, Chapter 8), societal activism (Chapter 5), responsibility and solidarity (Chapter 7, Chapter 8). The universally present English language is included in the LLs of all the studied research sites but besides this common trait, the chapters discuss urban LLs with a diversity of languages and (im)balances between them. Chapter 3 further discusses the challenges of labelling signs of the urban LLs according to clearly demarcated categories of named languages.
- *How do urban LLs evolve in relation to the global and local society in which they are emplaced?* Both locally anchored and global societal changes in the LLs are explored in the chapters, including those related to urban planning and development processes (Chapter 2, Chapter 4), societal discourses (Chapter 5), tourism and migration (Chapter 6, Chapter 7), language contact (Chapter 3, Chapter 6) and the recent global COVID-19 pandemic (Chapter 6, Chapter 7, Chapter 8).
- *Which theoretical concepts and methodological procedures have the potential to deepen understanding of sociolinguistic variation in urban LLs?* The chapters

included in this volume offer sophisticated and novel ways of approaching urban LLs from different perspectives that are adapted to the specific aims and contexts of each study. This includes both different ways of doing survey area selection and defining the unit of analysis as well as a variety of conceptual frameworks and methodological tools. Further, the studies presented in this volume give concrete examples on how research adapts to societal changes by developing new methods for survey area selection or data collection during the pandemic, for example (see Chapter 2, Chapter 6, Chapter 7 and Chapter 8).

A shared point of departure for all chapters is the sociolinguistic premise that variation in language use is not random. On the contrary, linguistic variation has both linguistic and social connotations. How LLs reflect and create sociolinguistic, societal and urban dynamics and how these relations can be scientifically explored is thus the main concern throughout the book.

1.1 Sociolinguistic Variation in Complex and Changing Urban Contexts

The departure point of this book is an interest in language in society and how language and discourse vary in relation to factors such as the geographical and temporal emplacement of signs in physical urban spaces. This approach links the study of urban LLs to a sociolinguistic interest in language variation related to regional or social indexes (i.e. dialects and sociolects). The main conceptual framework on which this study of variation in urban LLs is based is thus the societal rather than the individual level. We focus on LLs in specific European cities and investigate questions such as the profiles of different urban districts in terms of linguistic diversity, societal discourses or urban identity, for example. An interest in urban variation does not necessarily exclude sensitivity to individual and situational variation, however, which is highlighted in studies focusing on readers of signs in specific areas, or departing from citizen perspectives on urban mapping, or including analyses of language use both on social media platforms and on physical signs in urban LLs.

LL studies have been criticised at times for the haphazard selection of survey areas (see e.g. Blackwood 2015). Nowadays, therefore, there is increasing awareness of the need for the deliberate selection of a survey area as well as for inspiring examples of how this is done in practice (see e.g. Soukup 2020). As the chapters in this book illustrate, it can be done in a multitude of carefully considered ways, from handpicking urban areas of specific interest to allowing tools from human geography to guide the selection, dictated by the specific research questions posed at the LL. In terms of concrete possibilities, however, survey areas vary considerably from one study to another. For example, different countries and municipalities have different ways of categorising and registering their populations according to basic sociolinguistic parameters such as first language or ethnolinguistic origin. This complexity underpins most LL studies and gives the study of each local context its specific set of given background data, although there is seldom time or space to reflect in detail on the biases this is bound to create.

The need for and the relevance of measurable and exact parameters when choosing specific survey areas further varies depending on the focus and methodological basis

Urban linguistic landscapes reflect and create sociolinguistic, societal and urban dynamics. This book explores these relations scientifically and, focusing on the linguistic landscapes of selected cities in northern and southern Europe, sheds light on how urban areas with diverse profiles differ, and how linguistic landscapes change through tourism and migration, or in times of crisis. The book puts forward sophisticated and novel ways of approaching urban sociolinguistics and enhances understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced when studying sociolinguistic variation in these linguistic landscapes.

This book is targeted especially at scholars in the field of urban sociolinguistics wishing to approach the subject through the lens of linguistic landscapes. It also raises interesting points to anyone involved in language planning and policy reflection, as well as those engaged in urban redevelopment planning. Last but not least, it offers theoretical and methodological guidance to students and researchers in a wider variety of disciplines.



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