

THE VISIBILITY OF LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES: THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF YAOUNDÉ

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Abstract

This paper explores the linguistic landscapes of the University of Yaoundé 1, Cameroon. The paper highlights the visibility of language ideologies. The main aim of this paper is to show how the language ideology of an institution or a community is reflected on its landscape. It therefore attempts to show how the language ideology of an institution is reflected on its landscape (signs, billboards, notice boards, buildings). It also argues that there is a mismatch between the policy put in place and the actual practice. At the core of this paper are the prevailing language ideologies revealed by the linguistic landscape. The findings from this study are examined using studies on language ideologies and linguistic landscapes. The paper suggests that the linguistic landscape of an institution or a community should be an actual representation of the people's language practices and should tie or match with the language policy put in place which is of course not the case with this paper.

KEYWORDS: Linguistics Landscape, Language Practices. Language Ideologies. Language Policy

Introduction

This paper is a longitudinal study that intends to show how the language ideology of an institution is reflected on its landscape (signs, billboards, notice boards, buildings). Although many studies hold that the language practice of a community is revealed through its linguistic landscape (Pavlenko 2002), this may not always be the case because there can be an overlap between the linguistic practices of a people and the linguistic landscape.

Historically, Cameroon was colonised by Germany, and later mandated to France and Britain in 1919 after the First World War. In 1961, the Federal Republic of Cameroon was born, as the formerly British Southern Cameroons joined French Cameroun, while the remaining British region united with Nigeria. The 1961 constitution stated that French and English were the official languages. Apart from French and English, Cameroon has about 280 indigenous languages spoken in the country (Anchimbe 2006). It also has a lingua Franca, the Cameroon Pidgin. The University of Yaoundé 1 is the oldest state-owned university. It uses both French and English as the media of instruction. The language policy of this university appears to foster bilingualism. It is important to state that the university functions on a tacit bilingual language policy.

The Aims of this Paper:

- To look at the visibility of language within the University of Yaoundé 1 in Cameroon.

- To discuss some of the dominant language ideologies that appear on the landscapes and how they are shaped by particular language ideologies.
- To investigate if the policy on paper is visually reflected on the landscape of the university.

Theoretical Framing of the Paper

Theoretically, this paper examines the notions of linguistic landscapes, language policy/practice and language ideologies. Researchers on linguistic landscapes have observed that the language practices of a community is revealed through its language on signage, postal etc. (Pavlenko 2009, 2010; Shohamy and Gorter 2009). Linguistic landscape according to Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25) is "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on governmental buildings". The language and script of a place or country is first identified by the billboards, adverts, and public signs put in place (Pavlenko 2009). These would suggest whether the country is monolingual, bilingual or multilingual. However, the study of linguistic landscape is important because it reveals different qualities of urban experiences as well as the expression of language conflicts (Pavlenko 2009). To this effect, Spolsky and Shohamy (2000), Kamwangamalu (2000) Baldauf and Kaplan (2006), and Brumfit (2006) argue that this is not always the case as a

mismatch between policy and practice can be reflected on the landscapes.

According to Gorter (2008: 1), language is around us, “displayed on shop windows, commercial signs, posters, official notices, traffic signs etc.” Most studies on linguistic landscapes have used this concept to describe and analyse language situations. Gorter holds that it may also extend to the description of the history of language or knowledge of languages. This has to do with language in written form in public spaces, what Bourhis and Landry (2002) refer to as language that is visible within a given area or space. For Gorter (2008: 2), linguistic landscape has to do with sign coding scheme with each made up of how the languages appear on the signs, the location of the signs, the font sizes, number of languages used on each sign, order of language on bilingual or multilingual signs. This view is used as the analytical tool for this paper. Lanza and Woldemariam (2009) look at language ideologies based on Landry and Bourhis’ (1997:23) notion of “the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region”. What is interesting here is the different ideologies people hold based on the language policy as well as where they place themselves in a multilingual situation and policy through their Linguistic Landscape contributions (Lanza and Woldemariam 2009: 190). With regards to the above observation, Shohamy (2006) argues that the public space can be a good setting for ideological battles. She further contends that the presence (or absence) of language(s) displayed in the public spaces communicate a message, “intentional or not, conscious or not, that affects, manipulates or imposes *de facto* language policy practice” (p. 110).

According to Pavlenko (2009: 248) linguistics landscapes are analysed based on the frequency with which a language appears, the ordering of the language in a bilingual or multilingual context, the relationship between presumed translation equivalents, the prominence of a particular language such as order, font size, colour, spatial location, as well as the mobility of signs. These can be analysed from different theoretical perspectives, and many always come out with the power relations between different groups.

As mentioned earlier, the linguistic landscape is attributed to Landry and Bourhis (1997:24)

because they were among the first to identify the relationship between linguistic landscape and language policy (LP). They noticed that language policy does not deal with the notion of linguistic landscape properly. Shohamy (2006:112) observes that it is a mechanism affecting *de facto* language policy and is a major aspect in manipulating language. From another perspective, Spolsky (2009:65) posits that the “public linguistic space” is shaped and controlled consciously by rules and regulations which are the key to language policy. Yet, Pavlenko (2010: 148) holds that changes in linguistic landscape should not only be seen as comprised of reflection of overall language shift, but as a “direct outcome of language changes in political regimes”.

Du Plessis (2011) on the other hand, refers to linguistic landscape as language visibility; he argues that there is a lack of alignment between the constitutional policy on language use and linguistic visibility since back before 1994 that was not corrected by the post 1994 language policy. Focusing on the Free State province, Du Plessis further argues that no explicit policy currently exists. In line with the above, Cenoz and Gorter (2006) observe that one of the ways of analysing language is by focusing on the written information on language signs in a given area. Based on this, linguistic landscapes also reflect the power relations as well as the status of the different language in the sociolinguistic context (Cenoz and Gorter 2006:67). It also contributes to the construction of sociolinguistic context as the visual language affects and influences people’s different linguistic behaviours and language use. The language use on the official language sign can be compared to the language policy of the region.

To get a better understanding of the Linguistic landscape and Language planning, Kaplan and Baldauf (1997: 3) attempt to define them as “a body of idea, laws, and regulations (language policy), change, rules, beliefs, and practices intended to achieve a planned change (or to stop change from happening) in the language use in one or more communities. To put it differently, language planning involves *deliberate*, although not always overt, *future oriented* change in systems of language code and/or speaking in a societal context”. In view of this, Mühlausler (2000) argues that languages are not isolated systems but interact with other systems outside linguistics such as culture,

politics, and environment. Based on the above, we argue that language planning on one part of this system somehow affects the other in one way or the other either consciously or unconsciously.

Spolsky and Shohamy (2000) from their stand point define language policy as “an effort by someone with or claiming authority to change the language practice (or ideology) of someone else”. Thus, the policy maker has some level of authority over those expected to follow the policy. They support Ager (1996) who sees language policy as obtaining power rather than distributing it. Spolsky and Shohamy think that if language policy aims at changing language practice, then there is a concern for studying not just policy making but as well studying the implementation and evaluation of the policy. For policy to be analysed, it becomes very important to evaluate its impacts. It is therefore important to note that sometimes the statement of the policy can be more important than its effective implementation (Abongdia 2013).

In light of the above debates, the writers in this paper are of the opinion that ideologies about language are an integral part of ideologies in other domains of human activity such as the creation of language policy. This observation is in accordance with the works on language ideologies by linguistic anthropologists like Kroskrity, Schieffelin, Woolard and Fairclough and sociolinguists like Weber and Horner and Myers-Scotton. We also think it is on these bases that Irvine and Gal (2000) point out that language ideologies are “the ideas with which participants and observers frame their understanding of linguistic varieties and map such understandings onto people, events and activities that are significant to them. These ideologies are not only held by the immediate participants in the local sociolinguistic system but also by observers like linguists and ethnographers, who have put in place, boundaries between people and languages” (Irvine and Gal, 2000:35).

On the other hand, Myers-Scotton (2006) is of the view that language ideology focuses on the legitimacy of the status between competing groups, and invariably favours the dominant group over the minority group. She holds that globalization has an effect on national languages by promoting “the increasing power of various languages that are already established as the languages of wider communication” (Myers-Scotton 2006: 136).

She however thinks that although language ideology can cause people to lose their national languages, it can in some cases help to maintain these languages.

From the above observation, Kroskrity's (2000: 8-21) four intersecting dimensions of language ideologies appear to be a suitable analytical tool that can provide some justifiable evidence from the data. The first dimension reveals how people's notions about languages are rooted in their social experiences and often tied to their political and economic interests. This dimension comes out strongly in studies conducted by Lippi-Green (1997), Cameron (1995) and Milroy and Milroy (1998) on the type of language-based discrimination that takes place in the United States and Britain against marginalized social groups who do not speak the ‘standard’ language. In the setting of Cameroon, we have the dominant Francophone group and the subordinate Anglophone group, which leads to similar patterns of discrimination. In view of this, Blommaert (2006) argues that language ideologies are not attributed to one person or located in a particular site (political party/government) but it penetrates the whole fabric of societies or communities and results in normalised, naturalised patterns of thought and behaviour. Thus ideology is seen as common sense, the naturalised activities that sustain social relation and power structures and the patterns of power that reinforce such common sense (Bourdieu 1991).

Kroskrity's second dimension reveals that social experiences are not uniformly distributed but differ in terms of the divisions in particular societies. Men and women, older and younger people, for example, may have very different perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about language. In this way, different ideologies can become contentious within the same group and lead to tensions between what are often state-endorsed dominant ideologies and their opponents (Abongdia and Foncha 2014).

At the core of the third dimension is how *conscious* members of a society are about their attitudes towards languages. Here, Kroskrity is saying that those who are most conscious of their ideologies are the ones likely to be most vocal about the value of different languages. But ordinary people's ideologies are more likely to be reflected in their actual language usage – the languages they prefer to use as

opposed to the languages they avoid using (Kroskrity 1999: 19; Dyers 2008b). It is worthy of note at this juncture that the second and third dimensions overlap sometimes.

In his fourth dimension, he shows how people use their ideologies about language as a bridge between their 'sociocultural experience and their linguistic and discursive forms as indexically tied to features of their sociocultural experience.' In other words, people are quite *selective* about the features of language and the role of particular languages in society when expressing their language ideologies. Certain features stand out, for example "*I don't like the sound of that language/language variety – it sounds too coarse/common/disrespectful*" or "*My language cannot be used at university level*". In the first example, the language or has somehow become associated with unpleasant social experiences and in the second example there is recognition of the absence of '*my language*' in a tertiary setting. A good example of this dimension is Swigart's analysis of the harsh criticism by the Senegalese Francophone elite of former President Abdou Diouf's speech to the nation in Urban Wolof, one of the local Senegalese languages, instead of French (Swigart 2001). It is also very important to note that there is an overlap of the first, second and third dimensions based on this example.

Based on the above, Sociolinguists like Weber and Horner (2012: 16) define language ideology as the "cultural system of idea and feelings, norms and values, which inform the way people think about language". They refer to Kroskrity's (2000) concept of language ideology as representative of perceptions of a language or discourse "constructed in the interest of a specific social group: they are multiple rather than fixed or unitary; people usually display varying degrees of awareness of these language ideologies; and language ideologies mediate between social structures and forms of talk" (Weber and Horner 2012: 16). Weber and Horner (2012: 16-20) list five major language ideologies:

- There is a *language hierarchy* – language uses can be labelled and divided into 'languages' or 'dialects', 'patois', etc., with 'languages' enjoying the highest status. Some languages also enjoy a higher status than others when they are labelled national or official languages;
- The *standard language ideology* (Milroy and Milroy 1999) – based on the belief that

languages are internally homogenous, bounded entities, with a certain variety chosen for standardisation simply because of socio-political movements, and definitely not because of any inherent superiority of these varieties over others;

- The ideology of *language purism*, which stipulates what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' language usage, and often appears in times of rapid social change;
- The *one-nation one-language ideology*, which makes language equal to territory and national identity; and
- The *mother-tongue ideology*, which believes that speakers only have one mother-tongue.

Weber and Horner conclude that the fear of linguistic heterogeneity and ideologies of purism are not just ideas and attitudes about language but are translated into practices that can lead to social consequences for the entire community. They see languages as determined by socio-political factors rather than purely linguistic ones, resulting in languages being social constructs – means of social interaction. In view of this, we argue that linguistic landscape appears to be a mismatch with the language policy since language is usually being influenced by socio-political and historical factors (Abongdia and Foncha 2014).

Methodology

This paper makes use of a qualitative research method to analyse the linguistic landscape of the university under study. The data was collected through observations of the linguistic landscape in and around the University of Yaoundé 1. The signs and billboards that we selected, were not based on any specific criteria but we made sure that all those that are used in the study are representative and a good reflection of the signage. The authors collected as many signs as they could but because they were avoiding redundancy, they decided to use representations as the signs were grouped in the form of coding and the most appropriate chosen to represent that category.

Some of the data was also gathered through interviews and open-ended questionnaires. Two sets of questionnaires and interview questions were designed, one for the students and the other for the lecturers. Since we used the qualitative research design, we decided to use lecturers and students from the Departments of linguistics, English and French because they

could have an idea on the content of the study and secondly to see how bilingualism manifests itself in these different language departments. Those interviewed on a face to face encounter were selected students and lecturers from the above departments depending on their availability. The interviews were transcribed and then used as part of the data for this study. We assured all ethical safeguards to make sure participation was voluntary.

Overall, the data was collected as follows:

- Attention was paid to signs and billboards on campus and its surroundings– the ‘linguistic landscape’ in which the students find themselves, which are visual representations of dominant language ideologies (Kroskrity 2000, Kress 2006).
- Open-ended questions questionnaires and interviews.

Findings and Discussion

The choice of the university was based first and foremost on its accessibility to the researchers and its bilingual language policy. Thus, our expectation is to see whether the landscape and policy have a match. Secondly, we are anxious to find out whether their signage could be a good reflection of the policy as it may be in practice.

As Cameroon is a multilingual country with over 280 indigenous languages (Abongdia 2013) and with an official bilingual language policy, one would expect the equitable presence of the two official languages, French and English, in the country’s linguistic landscape. Ironically, the language practices at the university are defined by the dominant language in their linguistic landscapes, so that when you enter the campus, the landscape should tell you already if it is a bilingual university or not. What made the study so exciting is the fact that one would have seen the francophones making an effort to study English as they are aware of its global status as evident in their interviews. On the contrary, they rely principally on the superiority of the French language, an evidence for Weber and Horner’s (2012) language hierarchy.

This presupposes that there is a policy on the one hand and practice on the other, indicating the actual beliefs, practice and management of those concerned (Abongdia 2013). Spolsky states that “the real language policy of a community is more likely to be found in its practice than in management” (Spolsky 2004:

222). In terms of the linguistic landscape, the bilingual policy of Yaoundé 1, tends to be invisible in the different regions, where one might assume the area to be monolingual by simply looking at its signage. In addition, where there is bilingual signage, the dominant language is positioned first, and presented in much larger font than the subordinate one. In view of this, Shohamy (2006: 8) observes that signs have both informative and symbolic value, and can provide some information on the creators or authors of the signs. Whichever language is dominant in a sign tells us of its higher symbolic value for the creator or sign-maker – this is the language that has real power or currency, irrespective of the multilingual nature of the population exposed to the sign. Cameroon has a very sweet sounding policy but the practice and implementation are mismatches. This is in line with Weber and Horner’s notion of what constitutes good or bad language.

The next image which drew our attention was that of the main billboard of the Higher Teachers’ Training College in Yaoundé 1 written only in French. It should be noted that this is a bilingual institution where both secondary and high school teachers in the country are being trained. One would therefore reasonably expect to find a properly translated bilingual billboard, because not everyone can read and understand French with the same degree of competence needed to interpret such a sign.

Fig.1. The Advanced Higher Teachers Training college (Bilingual, French and English)

There is no English translation on the board as it is written only in French. This is a good reflection of the actual language practices of one dominant language in the university. The above practice of dominant languages with higher symbolic values can clearly be seen in the major cities like Yaoundé and Douala in general and the University of Yaoundé 1 in particular. Here, most of the billboards are in both languages, but French is in the first position, followed by English. It is worth mentioning that it is not only the second position of English on all of these boards that matters, but the fact that the font is far smaller than that used of French (Abongdia 2013). More so, the use of a brighter colour (red) for the French version further justifies its dominant position within the country.

The second conspicuous signage that can be seen at the University of Yaoundé 1, is the main library. It can be seen that it is first written in French and the English version follows. Most interestingly is the font size of the French version of “Bibliothèque central” as opposed to the English version “the main library”. The English version is written in a duller colour and smaller fonts as if it is signature, trademark or something that is not equally important. One may therefore say that French has greater power over the English here as reflected on this notice board.

Image 2: The main library of the university with a bilingual notice

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Image 2: The main library of the university with a bilingual notice



Image 3 Department of Finance: Bilingual notice

Image 3, has a partial translation from French to English: “The University of Yaounde 1”. This appears to be problematic as the main content of the board is not translated. The importance of the main content of this board is indicated by the character font used as well as the brightness of the colour. This is similar to

the signage at the main library. In view of this, Simo Bobda and Mbouya (2005: 1) assert that “the language situation of Cameroon is further compounded by the total absence of a language policy which would regulate the use of the languages. This absence compels each language to fend for itself, and this creates more confusion”. This is to say that the language in use is that of the major role players. This is typified in the lectures where the lecturer decides which language to use whether or not the students understand

University notice boards and notices around the campus also form part of the linguistic landscape. At the University, monolingual signage occurred in this official bilingual setting. In the English and or French departments at the University of Yaoundé 1, notices were written exclusively in English and French respectively as these are the sole media of instruction in the departments given that they are language departments. However, in the other departments in the rest of the university, most if not all of the notices were in French with little or no translation in English. What we found on the noticeboard of the Linguistic department was quite interesting for this study. It was an announcement on the death of an anglophone student that was made only in French without recognising the deceased and his kins’ language of preference. This is the department that claims to foster the bilingual training for the university but which uses only French on all their notices including those that have to do with the anglophones. When we asked the head of department why the use of French, he said, the university is bilingual so the students should be able to read in any of the two languages. As a result one may question if bilingualism is limited to one language. Thus, Spolsky and Shohamy’s (2000) view that language policy aims at changing language practice come out in this instant.

Conclusion

It was evident from the study that most of the bill boards around the Yaoundé 1 campus were in French, but the few that were bilingual, placed French in a dominant position. These findings are in view of language hierarchy (Weber and Horner 2012), with French and English clearly ranked as the most important languages, respectively, at the university. In addition, these ‘commonsense’ positioning (Ricento, 2006) of the two languages as the most visible ones in the Linguistic Landscape

also reflect Kroskrity’s first dimension of language ideologies: in view that “...*language ideologies represent the perception of language and discourse that is constructed in the interest of a specific social or cultural group*” (2000:8).

Furthermore, the notion of one-nation-one language of Weber and Horner (2012) also came out in our findings, with French being the main language on the billboards in Yaoundé 1. This fails to respect the language policy and the Bill of Rights. To say this nicely, there is need for an attempt to be made towards actualizing the language policy in practice (Prinsloo 2011). In this regard, the linguistic landscape revealed a mismatch between their language policy and actual practices, and hence showed evidence of the dominant language ideologies, particularly those of the people in charge of the signage – administrators, sign-writers, lecturers and so on (Abongdia 2013). In order words, this brings out power relation where the interest of the majority speakers of all the indigenous languages is not taken seriously.

Based on the above, although the national language policy of Cameroon as well as that of the University of Yaoundé 1 promotes official bilingualism, the situation is typified by unequal relations of power, as those in subordinate positions are obliged to use the languages of those in positions of power and authority (Abongdia 2013). This is revealed in the prominence in the fonts and colour of the French versions on the board as against those of English. Thus there is a discrepancy between the policy put in place and actual practice. What amazes these writers is the fact that the interviews seem to give a contrary response to the practices as most of the French speaking citizens in Cameroon think that English should be the preferred language for instrumental and integrative reasons. In this regard, the citizens, predominantly the students need to change their mind-sets in order to profit from the two languages (cultures). This is because they stand to benefit more from their exposure to English.

It is important to note that since the onset of globalisation, English has become the lingua franca around the world while French has lost that position. Thus a wish to advance commercially and economically in the world of today means a need to speak English (well). The same is gradually becoming the case in Cameroon (Simo Bobda 2004). This may explain why most French-speaking parents

want to place their children in English-speaking schools and why it is important for university students to have a good command of English. It might have been for such reasons that students are allowed to be able to read and understand notices in any of the two official languages because they are going to have to be able to do so when they leave University and get into the global world.

The implication for this study is to understand the practice of collaborative teaching and learning so that assistance can be provided to support instructor/learners efforts to include multilingual interactions in their courses. In light of this, positive attitude is pursued with an interest of change and improvement. This type of learning acknowledges the interest to contribute to scientific knowledge. As such, it is based on common-sense as well as scientific knowledge as means to improve human practices. The scientific goal of such learning is to create knowledge of the practical that is practical to the practical (Dewey 1936). This is to say that both common-sense and scientific knowledge is meant for human practices that should be useful for management and improvement of practices around them.

Thus, this paper can be seen as an investigation into one or more local practices. In order to develop scientific knowledge, it is necessary to get close to local practices. Many times, such an inquiry is best performed as intervention, where the practicality of knowledge is tried out in actions. The study of ideologies is an essential element of any pedagogy which assumes that good learning is based on motivation and that understanding comes through modelling, participation in, and reaction to the behaviours and thoughts of others.

What really stroke us the most in our findings is the feeling that the lack of resources to develop the other languages could be the main reason why bilingualism/multilingualism is not practiced in this university. We think that this type of error obligated students and staff to use a particular language for instructions.

Finally, the main objective for the study of Linguistic landscape is to make sure those practical matters in local practices is to contribute to general practical knowledge. In many situations, this type of learning may also include intervention, of varying degrees, into the studied local practices.

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