

CHAPTER SEVEN

ENGLISHING, IMAGING AND LOCAL LANGUAGING IN THE GAMBIAN LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

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There is a problem with everyday notions of language and culture. Whole generations of sociolinguists have described how language is always different rather than the same across different regions, social classes, individuals, situations, audiences, etc. and yet, language is routinely pluralised – here is one language, there is another one – rather than seen as a material noun (i.e., nouns such as *iron*, *water*, *air*, *money*) that cannot very meaningfully be pluralised. This tendency also exists to some extent with the notion of culture as witnessed in utterances such as “anthropology is the study of different cultures”, but this plural notion of culture finds support only among non-specialists. Anthropologists have long resolved this issue, either explicitly by stating that “culture is a verb” (Street 1993), or more practically by avoiding the use of the word culture in its nominal *thing-y* form. This is easy with an adjective at hand: anthropology is not the study of different cultures, but of *cultural* diversity, *cultural* behaviour or of *cultural* practices. The same holds for literary studies which is not the study of literatures, but of literary works, or literary language. And history is more than the study of (national) histories, the study of historical events (and their connections). Language by contrast does not have in most languages a ready-made adjective at hand, which is a Whorfian relativity effect that has influenced our everyday as well as scholarly thinking about language.

Silverstein, in an article reviewing the changing interconnections between linguistic and sociocultural anthropology within the four-field configuration of American anthropology (2005), sees as common achievement of both sub-disciplines that they have declared languages and cultures (in their nominal form) dead. Instead, he puts the linguistic-

cultural at the epistemic centre of the field. Language and culture are not nouns here but adjectives and intricately connected and inseparable: to a great extent, the linguistic is the cultural and vice versa. There is indeed a long-standing tradition of linguistic anthropological work that describes language in terms of actual resources, events and behaviour (Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Gumperz and Hymes 1986 [1972]; Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity 1998; Kroskrity 2000; Blommaert 2008b), but it is only more recently that this problem has been explicitly addressed and problematised in the field of applied and socio-linguistics.

Various authors have attempted to overcome essentialist and artefactualised views of language by conceptualising language as a verb. Becker (1991) may be credited for using the term “languaging” for the first time in an academic paper. Mignolo (1996: 181) also makes use of this verbal notion of language when he asserts that “*languages* are conceived and *languaging* is practiced” (italics added). Referring to the Oxford English Dictionary, Joseph (2002) traces the use of language as a verb back to at least the seventeenth century and calls attention to the potential of these hitherto largely ignored verbal properties in the semantics of language for (applied) linguistic theory. Jørgensen (2008) distinguishes between language as the open and dynamic communicative system of humankind and *a* language as an ideological construct, and proposes the terms “languaging” and “languagers” to describe language behaviour without counting, labeling and delineating varieties when language is practiced (see also Møller and Jørgensen 2009). Piëtikäinen et al. (2008) also refer to languaging in describing the creative and playful language practices in and out of school of a young Sami boy in Northern Finland. Shohamy (2006) in her work on language policy makes use of the same strategy to expand the meaning of the word “language” into a more agentive and creative semiotic activity giving examples of languaging through food, fashion, architecture, images and numbers. Whereas language practices are inherently “open, free, dynamic, creative and constantly evolving with no defined boundaries”, she argues, language policies often have as their goal and effect to freeze and manipulate languaging into “a closed, stagnated and rule-bound entity” (Shohamy 2006: xvii). Phipps (2007) in her work on modern language learning and tourism also invokes the notion of “languaging” to address the playful ways of learning language outside the language classroom while “greeting, meeting and eating” in a new language. Also the notion of “translanguaging” has been suggested as a conceptual alternative for the phenomenon of codeswitching and language mixing as it occurs for instance in the bilingual classroom (García 2007; Creese and Blackledge 2010a, 2010b).

For Makoni (2011: 681), none of this goes far enough because “[linguistic languaging] does not question the assumption that language is a valid epistemological unit.” He proposes a radical disinvention of sociolinguistic and applied linguistic theory and a *tabula rasa* reconstitution of language by taking (non-Western) local knowledge, beliefs and conceptualisations of language seriously as an alternative starting point for the language sciences. This is necessary because in many parts of the world, and perhaps most prominently so in Africa, it has remained empirically impossible to determine where one language begins and the other ends (cf. Canut 2002). The ideological practice of counting and classifying African languages as separate entities is rooted in colonial efforts to know and control African populations. In many parts of Africa, colonial administrators or missionaries described the local languaging of an area in terms of separate linguistic systems, rather than a single sociolinguistic system, as a result of their concern with translating the Bible and in function of Christianising the colonial subjects (cf. Irvine and Gal 2000; Makalela 2005; Pennycook and Makoni 2005; Blommaert 2008a). In Makoni’s (2011:681) words:

Africa has been described as a continent with a large number of languages. Yet, in the same breath Africa is viewed as a “continent without language” [...] The idea of language in African context is part of a process of invention, a process set in motion in colonial Africa. The construction of African languages transformed the African “landscape” to fit into European preconceived ideas about language and society.

How then do we shape a sociolinguistic project that does not reproduce these colonial imaginings, that does not depart from preconceived Eurocentric ideas about language? Analytically reconceptualising language as languaging is one part of the solution; empirically studying language through practices, products, performances and spaces is another. These practices, products, performances and spaces may reveal themselves as sites of multilingualism and language contact (Lüpke 2010), but the starting point is not the co-existence of multiple languages. Linguistic landscape studies and (new) literacy studies more generally has that potential. Linguistic landscaping allows us to study visible languaging practices and products in public spaces, without having to assume the existence of multiple languages.

This chapter is concerned with the linguistic landscape of urban Gambia as a reservoir of traces of human practices (signs of human activity) that can be studied through the lens of a camera.

The chapter is divided into seven parts. This introduction has

introduced the notion of languaging; the following part situates this paper in a broader tradition of work on linguistic landscape; the next part discusses methodological considerations in researching the linguistic landscape. After these more general considerations, the chapter discusses three aspects of the Gambian linguistic landscape – the dominance of English and the creative Englishing; the minimal or emblematic use of languages other than English (Wolof in particular); and use of non-linguistic visuals in public signage. The chapter concludes with an argument for a multi-semiotic and local languaging perspective to linguistic landscaping.

Linguistic landscaping

Most researchers concerned with linguistic landscaping as a field of study acknowledge that the concept of “linguistic landscape” was coined by Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25) in a psycholinguistic study of ethnolinguistic vitality where they advance that “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.” The linguistic landscape in their study is a psychological factor among other correlatives influencing language attitudes and the (perceived) ethnolinguistic vitality of one language in the presence of another. Although Landry and Bourhis explain that the background for their study is the situation of French-English bilingualism in Québec, they give no description of an actual linguistic landscape. Their work is less sociolinguistic than social psychological. This makes this early work on linguistic landscape of limited interest for an ethnographic sociolinguistic project.

More interesting in this respect are the articles in Gorter (2006b) and Backhaus (2007) in which the concept is further developed and coupled with a descriptive ambition. These studies indeed open a “new approach to multilingualism” (Gorter 2006b) and introduce several interesting concepts (e.g., the distinction between government-issued “top-down” signs and local, often commercial “bottom-up” signage) but remain theoretically rather “positivistic” in the sense that they are primarily concerned with counting the occurrences of different languages in a multilingual ecology in order to measure linguistic diversity or evaluate ethnolinguistic vitality – an apparent legacy from the field of social psychology from where the term was borrowed. Beyond statistical assertions of the kind, “In neighbourhood X, n % of signboards are in

language A, p % are in language B and q % are bilingual”, little attempt is made to account for how language or languages are used, what message is communicated, how that is received, and how the language of the message interacts with other modalities of communication.

Significant theoretical innovation can be found in a series of edited books and journal articles (Leeman and Modan 2009; Shohamy and Gorter 2009; Stroud and Mpendukana 2009; Jaworski and Thurlow 2010b; Shohamy, Ben-Rafael and Barni 2010). An important source for these authors in theorising about linguistic landscaping is the work by Scollon and Scollon (2003) in which they propose a geosemiotic approach to studying language in what they call the material world. Drawing on examples of public semiotic practices around the world, Scollon and Scollon advance as a key theoretical concept the emplacement of signs in their physical environment. This theoretical engagement with their work, as well as with the social semiotics and visual multimodal analysis of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), Hymesian ethnography of speaking and Bourdieu’s notions of taste and distinction have led to more broadly contextualised, historicised and semiotically richer studies of linguistic landscapes around the world. As Lanza and Woldemariam (2011) indicate, very little of this work has focused on African landscapes, although there are important precursors investigating written language or visual communication in the public sphere without subscribing to the term linguistic landscape (Calvet 1994; Swigart 2000; Reh 2004; Bonhomme 2009; Bwenge 2009).

An ethnographically informed approach to linguistic landscape includes a theory of space that regards space not as a neutral sociolinguistic variable, but as “constitutive and agentive in organising patterns of multilingualism” (Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck 2005b). Spaces or landscapes are not semiotically empty, but are filled with signs and it is these signs that demarcate spaces and neighbourhoods that give linguistic clues (along with architecture and the “natural” landscape) in what sort of social environment one is situated. Such a theory of space acknowledges that people inhabit spaces and make use of them, orient to them and are influenced by them:

All neighborhoods have multiple “centers” which impose different orders of indexicality on their users – different codes and norms as to what is accepted as “right”, “good”, “marked”, “unexpected”, “normal” and “special” semiotic behavior [...]. People inhabiting or using such spaces need to orient themselves towards very different sets of norms and expectations, often simultaneously. (Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck 2005a: 207)

Spaces may enable or disable people to communicate in particular ways and to enact particular identities. Someone who is highly literate in a particular space (e.g., in a library when surrounded by books and computers) may become functionally low-literate in another space (e.g., in his village where very few books and stationeries are available). Someone who is considered intelligent or eloquent in one space (e.g., in the classroom) may become dumb or inarticulate in a different space (e.g., in court). It is because of this “second linguistic relativity” (Hymes 1966; see also Lucy 1997), a relativity of linguistic function rather than form, that space can be seen as a constitutive and agentive factor in language and literacy practices. Spaces produce informal hierarchies of language and “give off” ideological understandings of language and literacy, and function as models or templates for how language and literacy is practiced.

In this chapter, I am concerned with the linguistic landscape as an environment of language and literacy production in a twofold perspective. First, there is the sense of the linguistic landscape as the material world itself that is inscribed with visual texts and messages. Secondly, the linguistic landscape is also the environment that forms the background against which everyday literacy practices take place. Literacy practices and ideologies stand in a double relationship with the linguistic landscape: they produce the linguistic landscape as much as they *are* produced by the linguistic landscape.

Gaze and human space

The main tool to approach the linguistic landscape and render it into an object of study, is the digital camera (Gorter 2006a). Thus, the horizon of our analytic gaze or the filter through which we attempt to see the world in linguistic landscape studies is a visual, photographic horizon.

The analytic gaze adopted in this chapter is also primarily geared towards visible phenomena of public communication but not in isolation of the “soundscape” (cf. Scarpvaglieri et al. 2012) as communicators often make use of both visible and audible means of public communication. The linguistic landscape does not exist in isolation from and in separation of visual and audible channels of public communication; an analysis of the linguistic landscape can only be meaningful insofar as that broader public context is also described.

The observations made in this chapter are based on the analysis of a dynamic corpus of photographs taken between 2005 and 2009 by myself, student researchers and research assistants in various urban (and rural) locations. The main criteria for including a sign in the corpus were not

their representativeness for Gambian (urban) public signs or a predetermined geographical area, but our gaze itself and our subsequent audacity to intrude semi-public terrain and take the photograph. Signs are not randomly recorded but inevitably only after they have entered the researcher's gaze and have been noted as salient for whatever reason. This, however, is not only an issue for linguistic landscape research, but for all research in the humanities as Rampton (2006: 397) reminds us: "all data involve selection and analytical preparation, guided by their relevance to particular issues and their tractability within different methods."

The camera is not a neutral instrument or an innocent extension piece of our eyesight and memory; it changes and mediates our fieldwork in several ways. As a result of this visual and photographic approach, literacy practices are observed not through literacy events, but through literacy products, away from the immediate moment of production (although in a continuous live stream of reception, cf. Garvin 2010; Juffermans and Coppoolse 2012). This detachment from immediate contexts of use means that there is no established relation between the researcher and those who are being researched. This presents a problem if we are studying the linguistic landscape for what it can teach us about society and because we cannot study the linguistic landscape in the absence of people.

First, shopkeepers often expressed a desire to know what we intended to do with the photos of their shops. We generally attempted to approach people that could be identified as (associate) "owners" of the signs if they were immediately present. In all but few occasions, we were instantly granted permission to photograph the signs. In addition, we were often given interesting explanations concerning the meanings or histories of the signs that informed our understanding of the local literacy practices and the public space.

Secondly, persons living, working or walking through the streets or neighbourhoods sometimes also responded to the researcher's presence, in diverse ways. Compare for instance the contrasting reactions to being photographed in Figure 1 below (all the figures in this chapter are collages of multiple pictures). The photo on the left shows a young man on the foreground of the photograph I took of a wall in the area of Bundung with the inscription *ONCE ASSUL HINE NO CHICHIMAN*. As I took distance to capture the text within its architectural framing, the passing man inevitably entered the lens of my camera and was unintentionally captured. He anticipated on this and covered his head with the book he was holding in order not to be photographed. The two photos on the right show an opposite reaction of a group of young children who were interrupted at play by my photographing of the text on the wall behind them. When I

aimed my camera at the text on the wall, they left their ball game to throw themselves in front of my camera, which resulted in a group portrait of five young children incidentally posing under the arrow accompanying the text *POWERFUL NiGGERS*.

Reactions vary from curiosity to suspicion and from hostility to cooperation. These reactions remind us that the linguistic landscape is a human environment, a reservoir of (traces of) human practices and human activity.



Figure 1: Reluctant and eager photographees in Bundung

Englishing

A first observation about Gambian public signs is that only very few contain text in language that is not English. In spite of the fact that I have purposefully searched for signs in local languages and attempted to record all literacies in local languages I could find, virtually all signs are in English, however in a distinctly local variety of English. (Although I will be arguing in this section that English is also a local language, I will use the word “local languages” in its problematic plural to refer to those named languages such as Mandinka, Wolof, Fula, Jola, excluding English and Arabic. This is not unproblematic also because local languages are in fact not only local, but also global and diasporically dispersed. In local usage a similar distinction is maintained: e.g. *moo fing kango* “black people’s language” vs. *toubab kango* “white people’s language” in Mandinka (see the discussion in Van Camp and Juffermans 2010).

In the contemporary post-colonial, globalising world, English has spread so much globally that it has been argued, e.g., by Widdowson (1994) that it has begun to fall apart. There is indeed an impressive body of literature describing varieties of English in the world that conceptualises English in plural as “Englishes” (e.g., Platt, Weber and Ho 1984; Todd

1984; Kachru, Kachru and Nelson 2006; or the journal *World Englishes* since 1981).

In his book *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*, Pennycook (2007a) argues that the somewhat canonical presentation of World English into three concentric circles (“inner”, “outer”, and “expanding”) proposed by Kachru (1985) is inadequate to understand the complexity and diversity of English in the contemporary world (see also Bruthiaux 2003; Seargeant 2009). “Pluralization of English,” argues Pennycook “does not take us far enough and remains an exclusionary paradigm. Just as [...] the concept of multilingualism may do little more than pluralise monolingualism, [...] the concept of world Englishes does little more than pluralize monolithic English” (Pennycook 2007a:22). Instead, he argues “for an understanding of global Englishes that focuses on both a critical understanding of globalization and a critical understanding of language” (Pennycook 2007a:12; see also Pennycook 2007b). English is not a discrete entity with physical reality (in the mind or in the world), but only comes into existence when it is performed. And when it is performed, it is performed somewhere by someone for an audience. English is not *some thing*, but “is” only in a more abstract sense of the word: it *comes into existence only when and insofar as it is* performed, enacted or embodied (Pennycook 2007a: 58ff). Ontologically speaking, there is no such thing as English:

Although the effects of the global spread of English are of very real concern [...], it is at the same time much less clear that English itself is equally real. While it is evident that vast resources are spent on learning and teaching something called English, and that English plays a key role in global affairs, it is less clear that all this activity operates around something that should be taken to exist in itself. (Pennycook 2007b:90)

Saying that English does not exist is something of an overstatement, for what is meant is that English does not exist as a concrete entity, only as an idea, a myth, albeit with real consequences in people’s lives and for people’s sense of identity. Pennycook’s argument is similar to the atheist position in theology: arguing that there is/are no God(s) is not to deny the existence of churches or temples built to worship these God(s). It is only to say that the practices directed at God(s) are based on a myth, a fictitious idea. Much in the same way as the philosopher Feuerbach in the mid-19th Century argued that God is an illusory projection of humanity, Pennycook argues that languages are not divine creations or naturalistic givens “out there”, but human inventions, historical constructions (see Nye 2000 for a discussion in religious studies that resonates with the developments in language studies as sketched here). If we accept this “no-language-ism”,

then our task as scholars of critical language and literacy studies becomes the following:

We need to disinvent English, to demythologise it, and then to look at how a reinvention of English may help us understand more clearly what it is we are dealing with here. (Pennycook 2007b:109)

The linguistic landscape offers us ideal terrain to explore what “language” or “English” looks like away from the institutions of knowledge production and transfer where particular, normative versions of *the* English language are propagated. The linguistic landscape offers insight into what language or English means in an environment where form is not immediately evaluated and measured against central (inner circle) notions of what counts as (good) language or (good) English; it instead offers insight into real language and real English. Through linguistic landscaping, we can disinvent English as “a language” and reinvent English as a set of situated and distributed languageing practices.

Turning English into a verb, i.e. a fluid, flexible, unthing-like concept that is better captured by a verb than by any other grammatical category of word (cf. Joseph 2002) is indeed a step further from turning English into a countable noun (one English, many Englishes). What we are dealing with in the Gambian linguistic landscape is not the global spread of English or of the use of a Gambian variety of English, but local language practices that we may term local Englishing.

The signboard of KAWSU COLLEY’S INTERNATIONAL HAIR DRESSING SALON on the Sayerr Jobe Avenue (Figure 2), for instance, features COSMETICS, FACIALS, MECHE, PEDICURE and MEDICURE. The final word here is MEDICURE, in which a “d” appears where the standard spelling of the word (“manicure”) would read “n”. Perhaps enforced by the association of both manicure and pedicure as something medical, MEDICURE is thus spelled like “pedicure”. This is not a misspelling in the sense of an error committed against the rules of the English language, but a spelling that reveals that the Latin etymology of “manicure” (from *manu* “hand” and *cure* “care”) and its conventionalised Anglo-spelling are not habituated or enregistered here. This spelling that reveals that the rules of English hold limited practical value or prescriptive authority in a place such as the Sayerr Jobe Avenue. This is not bad language, but language that does not conform to the imagined and invented rules that are maintained in the historical or economic centres of the language. This is unmonitored and unedited, peripheral English, English of necessity as opposed to English of luxury to borrow from Stroud and Mpendukana (2009): language produced away from its centring institutions such as the

English language classroom which have the power to monitor or edit text in order sure it is “proper” – i.e. normative – English. In other words: MEDICURE is more creative than it is wrong.

Another example of peripheral English involves creative spellings that deliberately violate orthographic norms and make use of non-standard features, such as “eye-dialect”, a type of non-standard spelling that is visible to the eye, rather than audible when read out loud (cf. Berthele 2000: 596). This happens in SHOES DOCTA and HARLEM NIGGAZ (also Figure 2). These spellings make only a minor difference to the ear, but a great difference to the eye. The spellings “niggaz” and “docta” do perhaps reveal pronunciation particularities of colloquial Gambian English (see Peter, Wolf and Simo Bobda 2003 for an account), but the point here is that these spellings draw on creative use of linguistic features without regard for the centre’s norms. Violating these norms invokes identities that seek to distinguish themselves from the centre – the Shoes Docta and the Harlem Niggaz plumber distinguish themselves by aligning themselves with subversive, non-standard identities that are intertextual with e.g. African American gangsta rap music and culture.

These streetwise spellings occur in commercial areas on shop signboards, but are more common in the graffiti on the streets of residential neighbourhoods (see Figure 3). For instance, in youth gang markings or what appear to be innocent imitations of this genre, this type of usage is the norm. In the neighbourhood where I lived during my fieldwork, an otherwise peaceful and relatively crime-free area, textual traces could be found of dangerous-sounding gangs like OUTLAW BOYZ, BLACK BOYS CREW, NUBIAN SOLJAZ “soldiers”, CAMBODIA STREET SOLJAHZ “soldiers”, RUFF RYDERS “rough riders” and POWERFUL NIGGERS, each of which construct their identities and their sheer existence by means of creative use of “gangsta English”.

Here, again the imaginary identity display is very rich. Global connections with North American gangsta rap culture are creatively imagined in both form and content. Intertextuality with hip-hop or Hollywood-mediated images of street gangsters and pan-Africanist denotations (Nubian being a signifier of mythic Blackness) are applied as ingredients in a playful subversive appropriation of the public space. Standard English does not belong here, for what it would communicate does not create the same kind of effect. The Nubian Soljaz and the Ruff Ryders would be far less streetwise in standard spelling than in their current spellings.

Answering the question if this is still English requires a definition of language and of English, of the kind I have tried to outline in the

introduction of this chapter. Yes, this is English; but in a much boarder than only a linguistic sense. This is English that carries a heavy transnational cultural baggage. This is English if English is a local and at the same time global vernacular, if English is a local language (Higgins 2009) or a dialect of a supervernacular in Velghe’s terms (this volume). This is English if English is understood as “local languageing”.



Figure 2: Englishing in commercial signage on the Sayerr Jobe Avenue



Figure 3: Gangsta English on the urban walls of Bundung

Local languaging

As noted, very few signs in the Gambian linguistic landscape display text in language other than English. Notable exceptions, however, are the billboards and marketing products by Gambia's mobile telephone operators where we find text in Wolof, Mandinka and Fula albeit in the presence of surrounding discourse in English. Androutsopoulos (2007:214) calls this "minimal" or "emblematic" multilingualism: multilingualism that requires minimal receptive and productive language competence and exploits the symbolic, rather than the referential, function of language.

The signs in Figure 4 were photographed after a third mobile telephone operator, Comium, had entered the market in May 2007 and an intense competition for market share was fought out in the public space between Gamcel, Africell and Comium. Newcomer Comium introduced itself to potential customers in the Gambia with *nakam!*, which is the Wolof equivalent for "what's up?" – a fashionable, fun greeting used among young and cool people, but certainly not a respectful greeting for elders, where a more elaborate *naka wa kerr-gi?* "how are your people?" would be more appropriate. *Nakam!* (sometimes accompanied with *NOW YOU'RE TALKING*) was printed on large billboards in conspicuous white letters on a pink background and placed in various key urban locations and on every street and street corner across the country on smaller display boards in front of the retail shops distributing their products. The slogan was even printed on the back of Comium's SIM cards. At the same time, two versions of a publicity song could frequently be heard on the radio – one in Mandinka and one in Wolof, both of which opened with *nakam!*. In a matter of weeks, the whole of urban Kombo was filled with both visual and audible signs of *nakam!*, making it very hard for anyone to have missed Comium's loud introduction on the Gambian market.

In reaction to this, Africell launched a publicity campaign celebrating their self-acclaimed victory in the battle over market share with Gamcel, informing the public about this on large billboards as pictured in Figure 4. Take for instance the Thank You sign. The main proposition in the message, *Thank You / For making us / YOUR FIRST CHOICE*, is divided in three lines, each in its own typography, colours and letter size. *Thank You* is printed in yellow in a large italicised typeface. In the next line, the "thank you" is repeated in the same font but in a smaller size in three local languages: *Baraka* (Mandinka) in red, *Jere Jeff* (Wolof) in blue and *Jarama* (Fula) in green. The *Baraka – Jere Jeff – Jarama* line can be read linearly from left to right placing Mandinka in first, Wolof in second and Fula in third position, but it can also be read centrally placing Wolof in



Figure 4: Billboards and marketing products of Gambia's mobile phone operators Gamcel, Africell and Comium

the centre and Mandinka and Fula in the margins (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). *For making us*, *YOUR* and *CHOICE* are rendered in the same blue colour as the Africell logo in an upright Arial-like font, with the middle word *FIRST* underlined and in the same font and colour as *Thank You*. The Africell logo placed on top is a bold readable word in capital letters, with an antenna and a dot on the “I” in the middle of the word that transmits three rays of connectivity in green, blue and red – the colour

scheme of the Gambian flag.

As part of that same campaign, the signboard in the top right corner of Figure 4 could be seen in June 2007 in Kotu, a relatively up-market residential area in the heart of the coastal tourist area. In the same four languages, the following message was put up: *We're going to amaze you...* (English), *Nyung Lena Jomal si...* (Wolof), *Mbinal al Jakalindila...* (Mandinka), *MENG JAKINAI ONG...* (Fula). Here, full multi-word propositions in four languages are used in public display. This quadrilingualism, however, begs the question if there are people out there that are not literate enough in English to understand *Thank You* yet at the same time able to extract and decipher the parts in Wolof, Mandinka or Fula. What is displayed here, is the idea of local languages (Sergeant 2009) for strategic, advertising purposes, rather than the use of local languages for denotational communicative purposes. Like the Comium campaign, Africell's campaign too was not only played out in the linguistic landscape by means of visual advertising, but simultaneously in media such as radio and television as well.

Gamcel, the only public company of the three, proactive to assert and defend their position on the market against the aggressive and foreign-owned newcomers, spearheaded a publicity campaign around the slogan *YAA Y BOROM* "you own it". In an interview with Gamcel's Director of Customer Services, Mr Almamy Kassama, it was disclosed that the *YAA Y BOROM* slogan was used to replace an older slogan expressing the same idea, *MOOM SA REEW, LIGEEY SA REEW* "own your country, work for your country", which was put up on the Banjul-Serrekunda Highway after sponsoring the refurbishment and electrification of the Denton Bridge police checkpoint. The eventual *YAA Y BOROM* slogan was suggested by a griot praising Mr Kassama and Gamcel for the job they had done for the police. It was suggested that reframing this message using just one or two keywords would render it much more catchy. This suggestion was welcomed with open arms and the billboard at Denton Bridge was soon replaced with a large and conspicuous *GAMCEL YAA Y BOROM*. Gradually, *YAA Y BOROM* became the company's central philosophy:

You own this company. It belongs to you and your family and even the next generation. We are here to stay. Whatever we generate we plough it back into national development [...] Competitors on the other hand, go and build mansions in Palestine or Lebanon and then the next day Americans back Israel to go and destroy it. (Interview with Mr Almamy Kassama, at Gamcel House, February 2009)

Note that there is much politics going on here. Although strictly speaking I am the the addressee of this utterance, Mr Kassama juxtaposes international neoliberal capitalism with local nationalism and brings the broadcast mediated geopolitics of the US and Israel/Palestine and the Israel-Lebanese wars to the scene to rationalise and buy the trust of Gamcel's local Gambian clients. Only choosing Gamcel, Mr Kassama suggests, guarantees non-interference in the Middle Eastern conflict.

Shortly after the placement of that single billboard at Denton Bridge, the occasion of May Day Sports on Worker's Day was used to put billboards with *YAAY BOROM* and *GAMCEL FOR LIFE* all over the Independence Stadium and distribute three thousand flyers with the same text among civil servants attending the programme. Before Africell and Comium could counter this very successful campaign, a rising young musician, Nancy Nanz was sponsored to come up with a "very nice track" to carve the *YAAY BOROM* slogan not only into people's eyes but also in their eardrums. Gamcel bought airtime to broadcast the song on all the radio stations and on GRTS television, several times per day for a period of four months. In an ecology of news media where there is only one television channel available on antenna, the impact of this could hardly be overestimated. In addition to that, during the 2007 presidential elections, twenty thousand T-shirts were printed with the picture of President Yahya Jammeh on the front and *GAMCEL YAAY BOROM* on the back. The president accepted the T-shirts and his team even helped distributing them in a country-wide tour.

The publicity campaigns of Gamcel, Africell and Comium, each of which left long-lasting echoes in people's memories and durable marks in the public space, are novel and creative in the sense that these commercial actors experimented with something that very few had done before, i.e., the use of local languages for communicating public written messages on a large national scale. The prominent position of Wolof as the only language alongside English in the Comium (*nakam!*) and Gamcel (*YAAY BOROM*) campaigns, and as the most salient language next to English in the quadrilingual Africell signs, could be interpreted, in the style of Landry and Bourhis (1997) as a sign of the ethnolinguistic vitality of Wolof in urban Gambia. The linguistic landscape could thus be taken to provide tempting evidence of an ongoing process of Wolofisation in the wider Dakar-Banjul region. True as all of this may be, "language in the landscape is not always a question of ethnolinguistic vitality" (Leeman and Modan 2009: 347). Exclusive attention to the linguistic landscape as a factor measuring the vitality of different ethnolinguistic groups is problematic in two ways. In the first place, it departs from the supposition

of a straightforward link between language and ethnicity. It assumes that ethnolinguistic groups can easily be defined and delineated, that each ethnic group has its own language and that every individual also speaks that language as a first language or mother tongue, which is highly problematic (Wright 1999; Rampton 2000; Canut 2001; Brubaker 2002; Makoni and Pennycook 2007). The Gambia is ethnically and linguistically diverse – superdiverse – and one’s multilingualism contributes as much to one’s identity as one’s ethnicity. In the second place, a too heavy reliance on ethnolinguistic vitality risks presupposing a too direct link between the visibility of written languages in public spaces and the vitality of languages as spoken by people, and ultimately the vitality of the ethnic group itself. It assumes that ethnolinguistic diversity is visually reflected in the linguistic landscape and that a group’s vitality (i.e., its “survivability”) correlates with its members’ ability to inscribe their group’s language in the public space. This too is fairly problematic as there is a profound inequality of functions of language in Gambian society, especially concerning the “state of literacy” (Spolsky 2009: 29) of local languages. This was affirmed in an interview with the senior director at Gamcel responsible for the *YAAY BOROM* campaign:

I say no I don’t use Wolof more in my language because the television adverts are done in the four major languages: English, Wolof, Mandinka, and Fula. And our radio programmes, we do it in all the four major languages too. Yaay borom is my catch phrase. And I believe that seventy per cent of Gambians must speak Wolof to some extent. I think it to be a brand name like Coca Cola, which everybody should be able to understand. They don’t see it as Wolof. It’s Gamcel. It has the same effect from Brikama onwards [where Wolof is no longer a lingua franca]. Because for example on the TV whatever advertisement we did, at the end of the day the message is Gamcel yaay borom, whatever language you use. You see we don’t have that much tribal differences here in The Gambia. I said no, in whatever advertisement we do in their own languages. Don’t worry we’ll try to make them understand. When we do a radio talk show, a Jola talking to his Jola communities, we use the same Gamcel yaay borom and interpret it to them that this phrase means the company belongs to you and nobody else. And they do understand, oh that’s the meaning of yaay borom. (Interview with Mr Almamy Kassama, at Gamcel House, February 2009)

As expressed by the key architect of the Gamcel campaign, the use of local languages in the linguistic landscape does not merely reflect the ethnic composition of Gambian society. Like other words that have acquired national, supra-linguistic status (e.g., *dalasi*, the national

currency, *fankanta* “family planning”, *bantaba* “traditional court, forum”, *set-settal* “cleaning operation”, *tapalapa* “bread”), *YAAY BOROM* has become a language-independent resource ready for use in each of the Gambian languages, including English (cf. Edelman 2009; Tufi and Blackwood 2010).

Local languages are used in visual local languageing in the Gambian linguistic landscape, but their use is minimal (Androutsopoulos 2007); its use is therefore salient and emblematic for very specific communicative purposes. Local languages in the Gambian linguistic landscape appear to be used to achieve an effect of conspicuousness and markedness in an otherwise English-dominated visual environment and for its potential to appeal to an urban (and national) public of potential customers.

Imaging

There is one more point to be made about local languageing in the Gambian linguistic landscape, and that is that linguistic landscaping or local languageing is not all about language. A focus on the linguistic landscape as primarily a space of multilingualism is limited, as that would ignore the rich multimodal meaning making signboards and billboards represent. Reading the linguistic landscape with a purely linguistic lens, i.e., searching for the co-occurrence of or contact between different languages leaves a lot out of consideration that is well worth investigating. It is therefore useful to approach the linguistic landscape with the more elaborate toolkit of a semiotician as Jaworski and Thurlow (2010a) as well as Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) have been arguing for. A key notion in this respect is that of “multimodality”, as has been theorised in the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996; see also Iedema 2003; van Leeuwen 2005; Kress 2010) and Scollon and Scollon (2003).

Multimodality can be defined as “the [combined or layered] use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001: 20). Multimodality is the fundamental principle underlying all discourse, as all discourse involves interactive semiotic collaboration between different modalities to form a “text”. Types of modes or modalities include colour, typography, lay-out, size, position, vectors, etc. in visual discourses and pitch, timbre, gesture, body movements, gaze etc. in spoken discourse. The media involved in producing these modes include paper, ink, paint, telephones, computers, our voices, faces and the rest of our bodies. All text and talk is multimodal and multi-mediated, even when there are no images or body language involved. As far as literacy is concerned, images can be “read” as texts and

texts can be “seen” as images, both with an underlying “grammar of visual design” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996).

Signs in the linguistic landscape are often intrinsically multimodal and their meaning simply cannot be grasped by adding up the meanings of the composing parts. They are rather understood as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a “total”, “integrated”, or “complete” artwork, which the nineteenth century composer Richard Wagner held as an ideal for his operas – a combined spectacle of orchestral music, vocal lyrics, décors, costumes, dance, and a dramatic story line. Any of the subsidiary arts alone would have little artistic value, but when compositionally integrated and finely tuned to one another, they can work together to form the grand spectacle of an opera.

As Kress and van Leeuwen (2001:1) rightly observe, contemporary discourse (e.g., newspapers, magazines, films, video clips, websites) is increasingly multimodal and organised around the same principles as Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The signs in the linguistic landscape should also be analysed as an integrated, multimodal product containing text in a particular colour, typography, style, (com) position, which may or may not be attributable to one or more “languages”, and image in a particular realisation, colour scheme, position, size, etc. Just like in Wagner’s operas, each of these modes contributes to the full meaning of the sign.

One of the problems of speaking about these signs (and of analysing them) is the tendency to create dichotomies between text and image, between language X and language Y, whereas signboards are really all of that at the same time. Analyses of the linguistic landscape that strip language of the signs and choose to analyse (or count) only that, leave a lot of rich contextual material behind and do no justice to the intricate complexity of human sign-making in public spaces.

An important characteristic of public signs is that they are meant to be read (cf. Coulmas 2009) and designed with that readership in mind. Authors in the linguistic landscape style their messages in a particular way so that they can be read and understood by a particular audience.

An important contribution to sociolinguistics in this respect is the so-called theory of audience design. Developed by Bell (1984, 1997) as a result of his analysis of variation in the speech of radio newscasters in New Zealand, this theory was formulated partly as a critique to the overemphasis on the production of speech in the Labovian paradigm of sociolinguistics (where style was explained in terms of amount of attention paid to one’s speech). Bell’s main finding based on his own research and a critical rereading of Labov’s (1972) work in New York City, was that the most determining factor in stylistic variation is not the characteristic of the speaker’s social group, but of the addressee’s. The same individual

newsreaders were observed styling their speech differently on the news bulletins for a prestigious national radio station and on a lower-status local community station (Bell 1997:242).

The fundamental insight from this theory is that communicators always conform the form and contents of their message to the audience they target. If one accepts that signboards and advertisements play a role in the commercial process, then it is of vital importance for shopkeepers and business owners to be as inclusive as possible in the design of their messages. It is fairly basic commercial common sense that commercial enterprises aim to sell their products as much as possible (to produce maximal turnovers), and that insofar as they choose to inform (or persuade) the public about the products and services for sale, that these messages should be designed in a way that is optimally understandable and attractive to the target audience in mind.

When Comium markets their pre-paid mobile telephone product with *nakam!* instead of with *kasumai?* (a greeting in Jola) or *nafio?* (a greeting in Serer), then that makes perfect sense as for many Gambians Wolof indexes an urban, non-traditional, post-tribal identity. The particular form of *nakam!* (the slang greeting with an exclamation rather than question mark vs. the question-response format of traditional greetings) is targeted at young, modern, urban Gambians of various ethnic affiliations rather than at rural Fanafana dwellers in Central River Region, a day's journey away from all the action of the modern nation-state. *A na nga def?* "how are you?" or *jaama ngeen am?* "are you in peace?" simply would not mean the same thing. Comium, however, has started using the greetings *Hello!* (English), *Abedii* (Mandinka) and *Aa nyaga moho* (Serahule) as secondary slogans on certain posters and billboards.

Except in situations where there are strict legislations regulating the use of language in the public sphere (Backhaus 2009), commercial authors are generally little concerned with official language policies. In The Gambia, where there are very few (if any) explicit rules regulating the use of language in public, authors in the linguistic landscape are left in relative freedom to imprint and design their shop façades in whatever way they deem appropriate and advantageous. Whether a customer is a Mandinka or Serer, a newly arrived migrant, male or female, is learned or non-literate, matters very little from a seller's point of view. The ethnolinguistic identities of potential customers are irrelevant in the commercial transaction; they become relevant, however, in marketing considerations and in designing how to reach out to the public. A major challenge for authors in the Gambian linguistic landscape is how to deal with the great ethnolinguistic diversity of their target audience in public messages. A

specific sub-group with “special communicative needs” is the group of non-literates, surveyed to be at 42% for urban women aged 15-24 (GBoS 2007:59,133) and 54% overall for adults (DoSE 2006: 44). Although illiteracy correlates with poverty, it is commercially commonsensical not to ignore this group, as being non-literate by no means implies being completely without purchasing power. It makes sense to be as inclusive as possible in targeting one’s audience and designing one’s message.

Authors operating in multilingual societies do not only have different languages at their disposition, but can draw on a much broader semiotic toolkit to communicate visual messages. Therefore, if “audience design [...] applies to all codes and repertoires within a speech community, including the switch from one complete language to another in bilingual situations” (Bell 1997:245), then it must also apply to different modes of communication, such as text and image. Large corporations such as the mobile telephone providers as well as small traders respond to this challenge of communicating meaningfully with an audience including non-literates by designing their messages explicitly multimodal.

The Gamcel, Africell and Comium campaigns are all fundamentally multimodal and multigeneric in their use of various media and modes of communicating, using pop-songs and commercials on radio and television, giving out T-shirts and caps, placing signboards in front of shops, erecting billboards in key public locations, etc. Not only the range of communicative options (languages, modalities) in the campaigns is multimodal, but individual messages (billboards, television spots) are also designed multimodally. The Gamcel and Africell billboards in Figure 4 are predominantly textual but if you cannot read the text, the picture of attractive young women talking on the phone, as well as the colour schemes and their logos, give away clues as to what these signboards express.

Small retailers with a much smaller budget for publicity and communication, such as Nenneh Boutique and High Class Fashion shop on the Sayerr Jobe Avenue in Serrekunda employ a similar mode of operation. They may not be able to spend millions of dalasis on an ambitious advertisement campaign and reach out to television and radio audiences to inform a nationwide public about the products they offer. They can, however, spend a couple of hundreds or perhaps several thousands of dalasis to design the space in front of their shop to inform an all-day steady stream of walking and driving passers-by. Although employing entirely different means, we find the same strategy to be as meaningful as possible in signage in sites of necessity as in sites of luxury to borrow Stroud and Mpendukana’s (2009) distinction again. So-called

bottom-up authors in the linguistic landscape often also choose to design their messages multimodally by supporting their more exclusive text (in English) with more inclusive images. Textual information on shop façades may include the enterprise's name, some product information or a slogan, as well as contact details. Although some shops remain predominantly textual in the information they display on their façades, a great number of shops choose to be conspicuously visual in the design of their messages. Visual information may be much more powerful and explicit about the nature of the goods on offer.

At high class fashion shop (Figure 5), text and image work together to convey the meaning of the message. That this shop specialises in high class ladies' wear, shoes and cosmetics is not only readable from the words on the signboard, but is simultaneously "spelled out" (Kress 2000) by several images on the signboard and on both back and front sides of the doors. Textual and visual information are only partly overlapping here. Some information (e.g., that handbags are also sold) is only conveyed in visual modality, and not textually. That this shop does both wholesale and retail on the other hand can only be read from the text, or found out by asking. It would be interesting to repeat Siber's (2005) artistic photographic experiment and present the image and text layers of information in two separate reproductions to ask ourselves what mode is the most salient source of information here. Bottom line is that there is, and purposefully so, a lot of visual languageing designed into the commercial signage that non-literates can accessibly decipher.

NENNEH BOUTIQUE (Figure 5) on the same street, makes even less use of text on its signboard, presenting only the shop's name, an inconspicuous "nice baby" in the top left corner and two telephone numbers in the bottom left corner. Here, detailed product information is given in the visual mode only, showing a carefully drawn baby, baby clothes, baby shoes, baby cosmetics and other specialised baby equipment like a baby bath and baby chair. The three bottles drawn in the middle of the signboard contain text: baby lotion, baby oil, and baby powder. The textual inscriptions, however, are far too small to be read from a normal pedestrian's point of view as this signboard is put up rather high above the entrance of the shop. The function of the text here is not giving readable information about the actual types of cosmetic products offered, but visual realism: depicting the products as realistically as possible (thus with a clue of the inscriptions such bottles and products have in the real world).



Figure 5: Nenneh Boutique and High Class Fashion Shop on the Sayerr Jobe Avenue

Conclusion

This chapter has presented an argument for a multi-semiotic understanding of the linguistic landscape in which language is just one, and not necessarily the most crucial analytic category in a descriptive linguistics of the public space.

The linguistic landscape is a complex mosaic of linguistic-semiotic resources in society and offers an insight into implicit norms of dealing with multilingualism and literacy in particular societies. In this chapter I have described the linguistic landscape of urban Gambia from an ethnographic and social semiotic perspective and have explored the relation between social and ethnolinguistic diversity and the linguistic landscape. Given the multilingual profile of Gambian society and the

difficulty I had in finding visible evidence of Mandinka, Wolof and other (non-English) local languages in the public space, I argued that the occasional use of local languages in an otherwise English-only environment serves a symbolic rather than communicative function and has more to do with the creativity of commercial publicity campaigns than reflecting ethnolinguistic relations. Assuming that a description of the linguistic landscape becomes more meaningful if a broader understanding of language-as-communication is handled, I have argued that the linguistic landscape should be seen and analysed as multimodal discourse, simply because much sign-work consists of both text and image, but also because both image and text are fundamentally multimodal: every image can be read as text and every text can be inspected as image. With Kress (2010:1) we should take “multimodality as the normal state of human communication”, and start from this given in studying the linguistic landscape. I hope to have shown that it is a viable course for linguistic landscape studies to further expand the scenery by situating public signage in a wider, integrated semiotic ecology involving not only visual-textual signs, but a variety of publicly broadcast and mediated discourse such as radio and television commercials, pop songs, clothes, political campaigns, and literacy products in general.

Studying the linguistic landscape offers a good opportunity to rethink how we conceptualise language, for language is not be the most crucial analytic category in a descriptive linguistics of the linguistic landscape. To understand what is going on here, to make sense of the social and discursive constructions inscribed in Africa’s cityscapes, we are more served with the theoretical apparatus of a semiotician than that of a linguist. We have seen that commercial actors draw on bits and pieces of different languages in communicating their merchandise to their target audience. In doing so, the use of images and recognisable logos is found to have a greater communicative appeal than signs duplicating the same message in four languages such as Africell’s quadrilingual sign in Figure 4. Striving for all local languages to be given equal functions in publicity campaigns may be politically correct, but practically impossible. Using a single catch phrase in one language (*nakam!*, *yaay borom*) while communicating the entire message multilingually elsewhere is more effective, Mr Kassama from Gamcel maintains, and does not necessarily form a threat to a diversity and smaller ethnolinguistic groups’ vitality. Mr Kassama’s view that ethnic (“tribal”) differences should not be exaggerated finds longstanding support in Africanist scholarship (cf. Mafeje 1971; Wright 1999; Juffermans 2012).

Linguistic landscaping as the study of language and literacy as

spatially inscribed and material linguistic-semiotic practice, invites us to disinvent and reconstitute our understanding of language. This is necessary, if only because African literacies force us to look beyond and beneath languages as bounded systems that are given in time and space; African literacies, such as those in urban Gambia, impose on its observers the more dynamic, fluid and creative view of language that is implied in the notions of Englishing, imaging and local languaging.

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