

Multimodality and audiences: local languaging in the Gambian linguistic landscape

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the linguistic landscape in urban Gambia. It reviews recent work done on linguistic landscapes and explores the relation between The Gambia's social and ethnolinguistic diversity and visible linguistic phenomena in the public space from an ethnographic and social semiotic perspective. It is argued that the occasional use of local languages in an otherwise English-only environment (as, e.g., in the publicity campaigns of the mobile phone operators Gamcel, Africell and Comium) serves a symbolic rather than communicative function and has more to do with corporate creativity than it reflects ethnolinguistic relations. The overall absence of local languages and the salience of images in the Gambian linguistic landscape should be understood in the context of an informal English-only policy for visual communication and the relatively high rate of illiteracy that is typical for a postcolonial Third World country. Drawing on the theoretical notions of audience design and multimodality, it is shown how retailers in a major shopping street Serrekunda (the country's largest conurbation) use images more than multilingualism as a vernacular strategy to accommodate illiterates in their audiences. The paper concludes with an argument that 'language' may not be the most crucial analytic category in a descriptive linguistics of the linguistic landscape, and that 'local languaging' may be a more suitable term to capture what is going on linguistically in public spaces.

KEYWORDS: MULTILINGUALISM, PUBLIC SPACE, MOBILE PHONE, SIGNBOARDS,
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1 The linguistic landscape

In the past decade or so, linguists and other social scientists have turned their interest to visible linguistic phenomena in the public space. The object of these studies can be identified as the linguistic landscape. Most authors concerned with this field of research acknowledge that the concept of 'linguistic landscape' was coined by Landry and Bourhis (1997) in a psycholinguistic study of ethno-linguistic vitality: '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' (1997:25). The linguistic landscape here is a psychological factor among other correlatives influencing language attitudes and the (perceived) ethno-linguistic vitality of one language in the presence of another. Although Landry and Bourhis make clear 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 it is 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 (2006) and Backhaus (2007) in which the concept is further developed and coupled with a descriptive ambition. For instance, detailed quantitative descriptions are given of the relative presence of Hebrew, Arabic and English in the streets of Israel (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006), of the relative public visibility of minority languages Basque and Frisian alongside national (Spanish and Dutch) and international languages (English) in the Basque country and Friesland respectively (Cenoz and Gorter, 2006), and of the uses of multiple scripts and languages in Bangkok (Huebner, 2006) and Tokyo (Backhaus, 2006).

These studies indeed open a 'new approach to multilingualism' (Gorter, 2006) and introduce several interesting concepts (e.g. the distinction between government-issued 'top-down' signs and local, often commercial 'bottom-up' signage). However, they theoretically remain somewhat unsophisticated and '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 ethno-linguistic vitality – a clear 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 different languages are used, what message is conveyed, how that is received, and how the language of the message interacts with other semiotic modes and social categories. Other studies in this tradition include Edelman (2006) and Barni (2008).

Simultaneous to the developments sketched above, numerous studies have been carried out that focus on the use of written texts in the public sphere, or visual communication more generally, without explicitly using the term 'linguistic landscape', approaching it from related disciplines such as (new) literacy studies, critical discourse analysis, studies of multilingualism, critical photography and linguistic ethnography (e.g. Barton et al., 1994; Calvet, 1994; Hodge and Jones, 2000; Swigart, 2000; Scollon and Scollon, 2003; Reh, 2004; Siber, 2005; Papen, 2006; Collins and Slembrouck, 2007; Lou, 2007; Jørgensen, 2008b; Bonhomme, 2009).

Much theoretical innovation comes in a full-length book edited by Shohamy and Gorter (2009) which includes contributions by all of the authors in Gorter (2006) and many others. The chapters in this book seek to expand the scenery of linguistic landscape studies, not only empirically by including work from a larger number of geographic, historical and social settings, but also theoretically by engaging with work done under the labels of geosemiotics and nexus analysis (Scollon and Scollon, 2003, 2004), social semiotics and multimodal communication (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001) and the ethnography of speaking (Hymes, 1986), or by investigating the linguistic landscape in relation to advertising, graffiti, scientific practice and tourism. Also engaged with expanding the scope and depth of linguistic landscape studies are Leeman and Modan (2009), Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) and Jaworski and Thurlow (2010), who propose more broadly contextualised, historicised and semiotic approaches to studying the linguistic landscape.

For instance, in their study of commercial signage in Khayelitsha township in the Cape Town area, Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) argue for a 'material ethnographic' and semiotic approach to linguistic landscaping and propose a theorisation of space as constructed and constrained by local economies of literacy production. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction and his notions of taste of necessity and taste of luxury, they refer to public signage in sites of necessity and sites of luxury. Sites of luxury are economically advantaged spaces that are appropriated (with official authorisation) by well-resourced companies to advertise expensive products and services by means of professionally outsourced high-tech modes of literacy production. Sites of necessity on the other hand are lower in the economic hierarchy and predisposed towards inexpensive and more strictly local products and services for everyday needs by means of low-tech, locally available ('grassroots') literacy materials. This distinction is similar to Ben-Rafael et al.'s (2006) distinction between top-down and bottom-up flows in the linguistic landscape. The different technological affordances of top-down or luxury signage and bottom-up or signage of necessity are consequential for the

organisation of multilingual and other semiotic resources in a sign (e.g. with respect to the use of orthographic standards). The linguistic landscape may therefore be taken as 'a resource for the study of social circulations of meaning in society' (Stroud and Mpendukana, 2009:380).

In this paper, I am concerned with the linguistic landscape of urban Gambia. Following up on an earlier paper (Juffermans, 2008), this paper explores the relation between The Gambia's social and ethnolinguistic diversity and the linguistic landscape. By adopting a descriptive ethnographic type of sociolinguistics, I will explain how authors in the linguistic landscape deal with the problem of communicating to an audience that includes people with very diverse linguistic repertoires and socio-ethnic backgrounds. I will especially focus on how authors design their messages to make them accessible, or 'readable', for non-literates.

The remainder of this paper is organised in six parts: I first briefly outline the ethnolinguistic and sociolinguistic background of urban Gambia (see also Juffermans and McGlynn, 2009). I then discuss some methodological considerations of researching visual linguistic phenomena. In section 4, I turn to a description of the functions of local languages in the three mobile telephone providers' advertising campaigns of 2007–2009. Subsequently in sections 5 and 6, I draw on the notions of multimodality and audience design that emerge as key theoretical concepts in explaining the salience of images in the Gambian linguistic landscape as a vernacular strategy of dealing with illiteracy. The paper concludes with an argument that 'language' may not be the most crucial analytic category in a descriptive linguistics of the linguistic landscape, and that studying the linguistic landscape may offer viable ways of rethinking received assumptions about multilingualism.

2 An ethnolinguistic profile of The Gambia

The Gambia has an estimated population of 1.7 million on a land surface of 10,380 square kilometres, which makes it the smallest but also one of the most densely populated countries in continental Africa. Located in the extreme west of West Africa, The Gambia is entirely surrounded by Senegal apart from a short coastline on the Atlantic Ocean.

Official figures usually cite nine ethnic groups (in order of decreasing population size): Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, Jola, Serahule, Serer, Manjago, Bambara, and Aku (Juffermans and McGlynn, 2009:333). It is important to note that the statistics are for the social category of ethnic group and that no official numbers exist on the use of language. Very often, however, the ethnicity figures are given as a substitute for language use. This is problematic because that projects unitary and monolingual linguistic identities to Gambians and presupposes that Gambians speak first and foremost the language of their own ethnic group. This

is evidently not always true, for example in the case of Mandinka-nised Jolas and Wolof-ised Serers (see Wright, 1999 for historical reflections on Gambian ethnicities).

As a former British colony (until 1965), the official language is English. English is not only the 'language of the offices' as van Camp (2009) puts it, but also the sole medium of instruction in schools at all levels, even though informal spoken use of local languages in the classroom is widely practiced and *de facto* tolerated (McGlynn and Martin, 2009). As a predominantly Muslim country, Arabic occupies an important position in the language ecology of The Gambia, in particular for initial greetings and praying, as well as for religious education. Surrounded by Senegal and in proximity to other 'Francophone' countries, French also has some formal and informal function in The Gambia, albeit limited.

Apart from the nine or more Gambian ethnicities, a significant portion of the Gambian population (approximately 15%) are foreign nationals from *Francophone* Senegal, Guinea and Mali, *Anglophone* Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana and Liberia, *Lusophone* Guinea-Bissau and *Arabophone* Mauretania and Lebanon. Note that a good number of 'Francophone' immigrants do not arrive in The Gambia speaking French, but more or less mutually comprehensible varieties of Wolof, Fula and Mandinka instead; and that although many Anglophones do speak English (and/or Creole English), many of them also continue to speak their own local languages in The Gambia (e.g. Temne, Susu, Mende, Igbo, Yoruba, Akan). For the majority of Francophone migrants, their Francophoneness is less useful on the Gambian linguistic market than their respective ethnic identities and local language competencies, while for Anglophones it is precisely their Anglophone identities they have in common with Gambians.

Within this ethnolinguistic diversity there are two local languages that stand out as *lingua franca*: Mandinka and Wolof. To put it in a somewhat oversimplified way, Mandinka is most widely spoken as a first and second language in the rural areas up-country, and Wolof assumes the role of vehicular language in the more urbanised Kombo districts in the west of the country, including the capital, Banjul, and Serrekunda. Except for some of the immigrant newcomers, virtually all inhabitants speak either Mandinka or Wolof, and a large majority of people speak both, to varying degrees.

From a practical point of view, public messages should be coded bilingually in Mandinka and Wolof if they are to reach 95 percent of the population, or trilingually with English if an international audience is to be reached as well. And this is exactly what happens in radio broadcasting, political rallies and other manifestations of public communication that are predominantly oral. This is not, however, what happens in visual channels of public communication. In contrast to the linguistic super-diversity in the range of spoken media of communication, the visible linguistic landscape is awkwardly monolingual.

3 Photographic horizons

The most salient distinction between types of language is perhaps between spoken and written forms of language, between audible and visible language or between orality and literacy. There is an argument to be made to also include audible forms of language into a discussion of the linguistic landscape. This would require a different technique and ethics of recording and analysis, and present very different criteria as to what constitutes the horizon of our analytic gaze. For instance, does speech produced in the privacy of a room but uttered loudly enough to be heard by neighbours, become public? Does the moaning of your upstairs neighbours waking you up in the middle of the night constitute a public act?

If we consider audible elements as they occur in their 'layered simultaneity' (Blommaert, 2005:130) as constitutive for the linguistic landscape, or when instead of photographic stills (snapshots) we take a panoramic live stream of images in real-time as the corpus of data, what then are the units of analysis? It would seem that in linguistic landscape research no absolute unit of analysis is possible, as every attempt to isolate parts of that dynamic corpus would involve the interpretive interventions of the researcher. A pre-theorised methodological clarity about the unit of analysis may be a more pressing issue for quantitative than for qualitative approaches to the linguistic landscape. In qualitative, descriptive accounts these problems can be solved on the spot in the process of data-collection and again interpretatively at the moment of analysis.

The horizon of the analytic gaze adopted in this paper is primarily restricted to visible phenomena of public communication as recorded in a dynamic (i.e. growing) corpus of photographs taken since 2005 by myself, colleague-researchers and occasional local assistants in various locations within a non-delineated area of urban as well as rural Gambia. Although my collaborators and I have attempted to record comprehensively signboards in three key urban locations (the Sayerr Jobe Avenue, the Banjul-Serrekunda Highway and the coastal 'tourist bubble'), to photograph a street or neighbourhood exhaustively proved undoable. The issue of selection is always at stake. The main criteria for including a sign in the corpus are not its representativeness of Gambian public signs, nor a predetermined geographical area or an agreed technique on what (not) to capture. The criteria are eclectic and impressionistic: determined by our gaze, the practical circumstances in the place, the photographer's audacity to intrude onto semi-public terrain and take the photograph and sometimes the granting of permission from the owner of the sign. In linguistic landscape data collection, signs are not randomly recorded; this occurs only after they have entered the researcher's gaze as salient. This,

however, is not only an issue for linguistic landscape research, but for all research in the humanities: '[a]ll data involve selection and analytical preparation, guided by their relevance to particular issues and their tractability within different methods' (Rampton, 2006:397).

4 Local languages and corporate literacies

A first observation to be made regarding (my corpus of photographs of) Gambian public signs is that only very few contain text in local languages. This is despite the fact that I have purposefully searched for signs in local languages and gone to special trouble to record all literacies in local languages I could find. A first-time visitor to The Gambia wandering through the streets of Serrekunda or Banjul would discover that public signs are virtually all in English and in a distinctly local variety of English – Gambian English or 'Gamblish'. This is not to be confused with Krio or Aku (Peter and Wolf, 2003), but is quite simply English enriched with lexical Gambianisms and local proper names (cf. Peter, Wolf and Simo Bobda, 2003; Wolf and Juffermans, 2008).

The signboards in Figures 1, 2 and 3, issued by mobile telephone operators Gamcel and Africell, are some of the few signs in my corpus containing a significant amount of local languages, but even here, not in the absence of surrounding discourse in English. These signboards were found and photographed after a third mobile telephone operator, Comium, entered the market (in May 2007), and competition for market share gained an unprecedented highpoint.

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 (here, a more elaborate *naka wa kerr-gi* 'how are your people?' would be appropriate). *Nakam!* was printed in conspicuous white letters on a pink background on large billboards (sometimes accompanied with *NOW YOU'RE TALKING*) in various key urban locations and also on smaller display boards in front of the shops selling their products, as well as on the scratch cards for prepaid credit and even on the back of their SIM cards (see Figure 4). 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.



Figure 1: Gamcel YAA Y BOROM (Banjul, June 2008).



Figure 2: Quadrilingual sign, Africell (Kotu, June 2007).



Figure 3: Africell's *Thank You* sign (Brikama, June 2007).



Figure 4: Comium products: *nakam!* (assembled in February 2009).

At about the same time, Africell launched a publicity campaign celebrating its self-acclaimed victory in the battle over market share with Gamcel, informing the public about this on large billboards such as in Figure 3. The main proposition in this message, *ThanK You / For making us / YOUR FIRST CHOICE*, is divided into three lines, each with 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 font 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 centrically placing Wolof in the centre and Mandinka and Fula in the margins. *For making us* and *YOUR [FIRST] CHOICE* is rendered in the same blue color 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 – again – green, blue and red, which happens to be the colour scheme of the Gambian flag.

As part of that same campaign, the signboard in Figure 2 could be seen in June 2007 in Kotu, a relatively up-market residential area bordering the coastal tourist development 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 for advertising. We may

wonder, however, whether the use of these four languages has a primarily communicative or rather a symbolic function. This begs the question if there are people out there that are not literate enough in English to understand *Thank You*, but are able to extract and decode the parts in Wolof, Mandinka or Fula. Like the Comium campaign, Africell's campaign too was not only played out in the linguistic landscape by means of visual advertising, but simultaneously the same and other messages could be heard and seen in other public channels of communication such as radio and television.

Simultaneously, Gamcel, the only (partially) publicly owned company of the three, spearheaded a publicity campaign around the slogan *YAA Y BOROM* 'you own it' to assert and defend its position on the market against the aggressive and foreign-owned competitors. In an interview, Gamcel's Director of Customer Services, Mr Almamy Kassama, 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. (Common throughout West Africa, griots are praise singers, historians, musicians, somewhat equivalent to bards in Medieval Europe). It was suggested that reframing this message using just one or two keywords would render it much more powerful. 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 Kassama at Gamcel House, February 2009)

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 *YAA Y 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 *YAA Y 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, 20,000 T-shirts were printed with the picture of President Jammeh on the front and *Gamcel YAA Y BOROM* on the back. The president accepted the T-shirts and his team helped to distribute them during a nation-wide tour.

The publicity campaigns of Gamcel, Africell and Comium are novel and creative in the sense that these commercial actors experimented with something that very few had done before, namely, 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 (*YAA Y BOROM*) campaigns, and as the most salient language next to English in the quadrilingual Africell signs, could be interpreted, faithful to 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 falls short 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 fairly problematic (Brubaker, 2002; Canut, 2001; Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Rampton, 2000; Wright, 1999). As outlined in section 2, The Gambia has an inherently multilingual and multi-ethnic ecology and people’s multilingualism contributes as much to their identities as their ethnicities. In the second place, a too heavy reliance on ethnolinguistic vitality risks presupposing too direct a 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. Furthermore,

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. *YAA Y BOROM* is my catch phrase. And I believe that seventy

percent 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 talkshow, 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 Kassama at Gamcel House, February 2009)

As expressed by one of the architects 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 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. Apparently, there are words that do not belong to any particular language, or not anymore (cf. Edelman, 2009 for a discussion of dealing with brand names in quantitative linguistic landscape research). The appropriate level of analysis in studying linguistic landscaping therefore is rather linguistic resources than languages in a narrow sense.

I have elaborated rather lengthily on the publicity campaigns of the Gambian mobile telephone providers here for two reasons. In the first place to illustrate that the linguistic landscape does not exist in isolation from and in separation from other channels of public communication – visual as well as audible. The analysis of the linguistic landscape can only be meaningful insofar as that broader public context is also described. Secondly, I also believe that the mobile phone providers' publicity campaigns provide useful examples of the need to historicise or acknowledge the dynamic character of the linguistic landscape. Signs in the linguistic landscape are not immobile and eternal objects; they have not always been how and where they are and will certainly not always remain how and where they are. Signs are made, 'emplaced' (Scollon and Scollon, 2003) and often modified, overwritten, or removed after a while, and thus always reveal traces of human activity and reactivity. An analysis of the linguistic landscape needs to be sensitive to such broader patterns of language and literacy use in society, because what happens in the streets must be explained against the backdrop of what happens at home, in schools, in the media, in companies, etc.

5 Multimodality

A very salient characteristic of public signs found in urban Gambia is the use of *images* alongside and in complement to *text*. There is a lot more going on in the linguistic landscape than just multilingual practice. Reading the linguistic landscape with a purely linguistic lens, searching for the co-occurrence of or contact between different languages, yields interesting results (Barni, 2008; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Reh, 2004), but also leaves a lot out of consideration, that is well worth investigating. Approaching the linguistic landscape with the more elaborate toolkit of a semiotician (van Leeuwen, 2005a; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; Scollon and Scollon, 2003) opens possibilities to analyse signs in their full meaning potential. A key concept in this regard is multimodal discourse.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001:20, 21) define *multimodality* as ‘the [combined or layered] use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event’ and *modes* as ‘semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter)action’. Modes, then, are realised in media, which they define as ‘the material resources used in the production of semiotic products and events, including both the tools and the materials used’ (2001:22). In its most basic form, we speak of multimodality when there is interaction between text and image in a piece of discourse, but in a more sophisticated version we understand multimodality as a fundamental principle underlying all discourse, as the interactive semiotic collaboration between all contributing modalities to form a ‘text’. As types of modes or modalities one should think of things like colour, typography, lay-out, size, position, vectors, and so on, or, concerning predominantly spoken utterances, things like pitch, timbre, gesture, body movements, gaze. The media involved in producing these modes include paper, ink, paint, telephone, computers, voice and other parts of our body. All texts and all spoken discourse are multimodal and multi-mediated, even if there are no images or body-language involved. In this advanced understanding of multimodality, images can be read as texts, but texts also can be regarded as images and read with the principles of the ‘grammar of visual design’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) as I have analysed the *Thank You* sign (Figure 3).

Signs in the linguistic landscape are intrinsically multimodal and we cannot grasp their meaning by adding up the meanings of the composite parts. They should rather be understood as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a ‘total’, ‘integrated’, or ‘complete’ artwork, which 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:

With the Greeks the perfect work of art, the Drama, was the abstract and epitome of all that was expressible in the Grecian nature. It was the nation itself—in intimate connection with its own history—that stood mirrored in its art-work, that communed with itself and, within the span of a few hours, feasted its eyes with its own noblest essence. All division of this enjoyment, all scattering of the forces concentrated on one point, all diversion of the elements into separate channels, must needs have been as hurtful to this unique and noble Art-work as to the like-formed State itself [...] With the subsequent downfall of Tragedy, Art became less and less the expression of the public conscience. The Drama separated into its component parts; rhetoric, sculpture, painting, music, &c., forsook the ranks in which they had moved in unison before; each one to take its own way, and in lonely self-sufficiency to pursue its own development. And thus it was that at the Renaissance of Art we lit first upon these isolated Grecian arts, which had sprung from the wreck of Tragedy. (Wagner, 1849)

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, multi-modal product containing *text* in a particular colour, typography, style, (com)position (and that may be attributable to one or more ‘languages’) and *image* in a particular realisation, colour scheme, position, size and so on. 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.

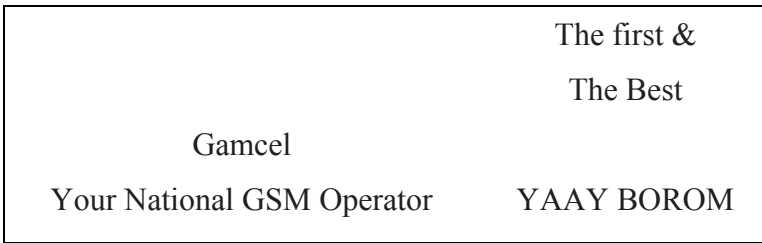


Figure 5: Text-only transcription of Figure 1.

The Gamcel sign in Figure 1, for instance, could be analysed as a bilingual sign containing eight words or two phrases in English, two words or one phrase in Wolof and the brand name Gamcel which is more or less language independent. The sign could then be analysed as composed of 82% English and 27% Wolof, and transcribed as in Figure 5. This would, however, be a gross reduction and simplification of the sign to words only and would miss the point that the text is printed on a light green and white background, in – again – red, green and blue. The transcription in Figure 5 is also insensitive to the fact that ‘The first & The Best’ is printed in a much larger font than *Your National GSM Operator*, and that *YAA Y BOROM* is rendered in a bolder, somewhat playful font (cf. van Leeuwen, 2005b). It also ignores the image of the good-looking young woman with her perm wave hair, uncovered shoulders and pearl jewels as she is expressively talking on the phone.

Colour, typography, background material, size, images and so on are all semiotic resources people draw upon to inscribe messages in the public space, be it commercial literacies (shop signboards, billboard advertisements) or more personal messages in public such as graffiti. All these types of writing have their own affordances. Not everything can be expressed in every way in every text type and in every mode and medium. Each text type, mode and medium has its own constraints and possibilities. Highway billboards, for example, are best when they are of a particular size and when the text is not too long and large enough to be read in a fast-moving vehicle, and when the image is large and clear enough so that its meaning can be grasped in a split second. Shop signboards are typically smaller and may contain more text in a smaller type-face and more detailed or even several smaller images, as they mainly serve pedestrians who have more time to read the messages than people in the former situation. Billboards require a wooden, iron or concrete ‘board’ implanted in the physical landscape to put the advertisement message on, whereas signboards do not necessarily need a board as the message may be inscribed (e.g. painted) directly on the façade of the shop.

6 Designing for an audience

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 (1997, 1984) as a result of his analysis of variation in the speech of radio newsreaders 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 news-readers 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 business sense that commercial enterprises aim to sell as much of their product as possible (to generate maximal turnovers), and that insofar as they choose to inform (or persuade) the public about the products and services for sale, 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 worse, with *nafio?* (a greeting in Serer), then that makes perfect commercial 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. (Note, however, that Comium 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 illiterate, matters very little from a seller's point of view. The ethno-linguistic 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 illiterate 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 '[a]udience 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 businesses, respond to this challenge of communicating meaningfully for an audience that includes non-literates by designing their messages in explicitly multimodal ways.

The Gamcel, Africell and Comium campaigns are all multimodal and multi-generic 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 and so on. Not only the range of communicative options (languages, modalities, media) in the campaigns is multimodal, but individual messages (billboards, television spots) are also designed multimodally. The Gamcel and Africell billboards in Figures 1 and 2, for instance, are predominantly textual but also the picture of attractive young women talking on their mobile phones, as well as the colour schemes and logos, give away clues as to what these signboards represent.

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 hundred or perhaps several thousand 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 info 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.



Figure 6: High class fashion shop (Sayerr Jobe Avenue, June 2007).



Figure 7: Nenneh Boutique (Sayerr Jobe Avenue, June 2008).

At HIGH CLASS FASHION SHOP (Figure 6), 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) sophisticated photographic experiment and present the image and text layers of information in two separate reproductions and ask what mode is the most salient source of information here. The bottom line is that there is, and deliberately so, a lot of visual communication out there that non-literates can accessibly decipher.

NENEH BOUTIQUE (Figure 7) 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 or baby walker. 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 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 to give readable information about the actual types of cosmetic products offered, but rather to depict the products as realistically as possible (thus with a clue of the inscriptions such bottles have in the real world).

If we zoom in close enough on the shoes and handbags pictured on the doors of HIGH CLASS FASHION SHOP, we find similar textual inscriptions: first of all the indication of the brand names *Givenchy* and *CK*, as well as the name of the shop, *High Class* or *HC*, sometimes appended with the qualification *ORIGINAL*, but also, as a sort of hidden transcript, the artist's signature (*FEMI ART*) and the phrase *WHO CARES!* Here, too, the function of these inscriptions is not to give readable and accurate information about the products offered (it is doubtful if original *Givenchy* shoes are really sold here), but to render the shoes in a high realist modality. In his commitment to realism, the artist has observed the practice of printing brand names on the imported luxury shoes and handbags sold here. At the same time, the artist has exerted his artistic freedom by hiding some information in a sub-layer of his proudly signed work of art.

7 Conclusions

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 paper 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 evidence of the use of local languages in visual literacy 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 depart 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.

Focusing on multimodal meaning-making, I have drawn on the theory of *audience design* to explain the salience of images in the Gambian linguistic landscape. The productive use of expressive images in both top-down and bottom-up public signage can be understood, I suggest, as a strategy to deal with a highly diverse and partially non-literate target audience. With no common language of literacy, nor an explicit language policy prescribing the use of languages in the public space, authors in the linguistic landscape who, for good reasons aim to be as inclusive as possible, strikingly resort to images as resources to design their messages. In doing so, they find an effective and practical way of dealing with illiteracy by making their texts 'readable' for all, despite the considerable ethnolinguistic diversity and socio-educational inequality in The Gambia.

Studying the linguistic landscape offers a good opportunity to rethink how we conceptualise language. Language may not be the most crucial analytic category in a descriptive linguistics of the linguistic landscape, and of multilingual practices in general. Not all words encountered in the linguistic landscape or elsewhere are words that belong in the strict sense of the word to a particular language. In real-life situations, multilingual speakers do not speak entire languages; they rather use little bits and pieces of language 1 in situation A, of language 2 in situation B and mix and recombine elements of languages 1, 2 and 3 in situation C. According to Jørgensen (2008a:165), who proposes terms such as 'languageing' and 'linguagers',

[w]e can not determine exactly which languages an individual knows, and consequently we can not tell how many languages this person knows. We can, however, observe that there is a wide spectrum of variation available to any individual and we can also observe that this spectrum is different from person to person.

Companies too, small or large, draw on lapidary pieces of various languages in communicating their merchandise to their target audience. In this process, the use of images and recognisable logos may have a much more communicative appeal than signs duplicating the same message in four languages such as Africell's quadrilingual sign in Figure 2. Striving for all local languages to be distributed equal functions in publicity campaigns may be politically correct, but practically impossible or commercially unsuccessful. Using a single catch phrase in one language (*nakam!*, *YAAY BOROM*) while communicating the entire message multilingually elsewhere may be the most effective way of advertising. This does not necessarily form a threat to a multilingual society's ethnolinguistic harmony and smaller ethnolinguistic groups' vitality as Mr Kassama from Gamcel maintains. Mr Kassama's claim that ethnic ('tribal') differences should not be exaggerated or overestimated is an argument that finds longstanding support in Africanist scholarship (e.g. Mafeje, 1971; Wright, 1999).

To conclude, students of language in society may need to follow the advice of several critical scholars in the field (Stroud, 2003; Jacquemet, 2005; Shohamy, 2006; Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Blommaert, 2008) and direct their attention away from the traditional focus of linguistics, namely, language as a bounded system, towards broader semiotic resources to see what is really going on when people 'language'.

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