



“All we do has humans at its heart”: Linguistic Landscape’s Value in Scholarship and Pedagogy

“Ens motiva l’humà”: El valor del paisatge lingüístic en la recerca i la pedagogia

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Abstract

Four prominent Linguistic Landscape (LL) scholars reflect on the value of LL research and its utility in education. Elana Shohamy is a Professor Emerita in the Multilingual Education program at Tel Aviv University. She has carried out extensive research on language policy, language testing, and LL, with a recent focus on injustices in the public space. David Malinowski is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics and Language Development at San José State University. His recent work focuses on education, language pedagogy and learning, and intersections between these areas and LL. Amiena Peck is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Linguistics at the University of the Western Cape. She has led innovative research in skinscapes, with a recent focus on autoethnography. Robert Blackwood is a Professor of French Sociolinguistics at the University of Liverpool. His recent work examines processes of memorialization in postcolonial Africa.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape; Pedagogy; Language activism; Minority languages; Descriptive linguistics

Resum

Quatre experts en paisatge lingüístic (PL) reflexionen sobre el valor de PL per a la recerca i l'educació. Elana Shohamy és professora emèrita del programa d'Educació Multilingüe a la Universitat de Tel Aviv. Ha realitzat investigacions sobre la política lingüística, proves de llengua, i PL, amb un enfocament en les injustícies a l'espai públic. David Malinowski és professor auxiliar de lingüística i desenvolupament del llenguatge a la Universitat Estatal de San José. Els seus treballs se centren en l'educació, la pedagogia i l'aprenentatge de la llengua, i les interseccions entre aquestes àrees i PL. Amiena Peck és professora titular i cap del Departament de Lingüística de la Universitat del Cap Occidental. Ha dirigit investigacions innovadores en paisatges de pell, amb un enfocament recent en l'autoetnografia. Robert Blackwood és professor de sociolingüística francesa a la Universitat de Liverpool. Últimament, examina els processos de memorialització a l'Àfrica postcolonial.

Paraules clau: Paisatge lingüístic; Pedagogia; Activisme lingüístic; Llengües minoritàries; Lingüística descriptiva

Linguistic Landscape (LL) has been growing as a field of sociolinguistic inquiry for the past thirty years. What started as a discipline focused on linguistic representation in official signage has evolved to reflect broader conceptions of language as well as multisensorial, multimodal elements that accompany language. Consequently, interest in LL has surged in the educational realm. An interview was carried out during the *14th Linguistic Landscape Workshop: Utopia and Dystopia* (LL14 in Madrid, Spain), with four renowned LL scholars- Elana Shohamy, David Malinowski, Amiena Peck, and Robert Blackwood (also editors of the journal *Linguistic Landscape*). These experts reflected on the significance of LL research and on ways in which educators can incorporate LL as an instructional resource. Their work exemplifies the regional and thematic diversity present in contemporary LL scholarship.

A common sentiment expressed by the experts was the human element of LL research. While LL scholars do not often deal with life-or-death situations, their research has significant human impact nonetheless. Malinowski points out that LL research empirically reveals inequalities, and Shohamy and Peck explain that LL researchers often serve as activists who promote equality for underrepresented linguistic groups. Blackwood and Peck encourage graduate and post-doctoral researchers in LL to explore questions they are passionate about and embrace the potential significance of their work.

Shohamy: I have one sentence my student once said. She said it about Arabic. She said, “When I see Arabic in the public space... then I know I exist, because otherwise I'm a nobody.” And she always says, “Arabic- that means they think about me! That's part of me.” I think we all are activists. We are trying to change what we see, and we want to make it a better place. You realize [through] playing with linguistic landscape... that I am an activist, and I can change this world. If I think of what is waiting for us in the next few years... I think it's this creativity of we can take part and do something to make this place a better place. And if linguistic landscape can be instrumental in giving some people the feeling- “Yes, you belong,” in some way or another, that's a major contribution.

Malinowski: Your student's words are so powerful, Elana... Linguistic landscape is one avenue into the fabulous, incredible diversity of the world's people and of ourselves. And it shows itself to us viscerally and right in front of us. Understanding that, and the fact that everything you see is also many things that you're not seeing... choices have to go into what gets put where... that's a question of representation, power, equity, and inequality. So linguistic landscape is

fundamentally about understanding inequalities in the world. From a disciplinary perspective, no matter if you're coming at it from linguistics, from English, from urban studies, from wherever you're entering, it's going to push you to push the boundaries of your discipline.

Peck: I will say that any academic would say that they are also an activist, so start from where you're passionate. You want to know where do you start? Start with what the problem is... what's really going on here? Why am I feeling uncomfortable?... actually raise your awareness... bring your full self into it... you just have to sit and reflect on what is it that really pulls at your heart that you want to do research on.

Blackwood: I suppose all of the work we do has humans at its heart, so there's always somebody behind it. That individual might not be trapped in a burning car [Malinowski had mentioned his brother encounters this situation in his work as a firefighter], or may not be suffering cancer, but at some stage someone is feeling something, and we are in some ways engaging with that and trying to move life on a bit, trying to make things easier, better, or clearer. So it goes a bit back to what you were saying Amiena [Peck], why do I feel uncomfortable in that space? Well, you shouldn't, and what we're going to try and do is find a way to stop you [from feeling] uncomfortable in that space... How can we use the work we're doing in linguistic landscape to try and bring people in, to try and engage with the human experience, however it is, in whatever sense it's being thought out. So yeah, it's not going to be necessarily the quick, dramatic pulling someone out of a burning car or saving a life with a new drug, but it is all about human[s] at heart.

In line with the idea of the LL scholar as activist, the group was asked whether justice for underrepresented linguistic groups could also be promoted in publishing via a higher representation of publications in languages other than English. Blackwood explained that this is certainly a goal for the *Linguistic Landscape* journal. Malinowski identified language teachers as a key group who may contribute to this end, both in LL as well as in other fields.

Blackwood: That's a great question. And it's one that Elana [Shohamy] and I talk about for the journal [*Linguistic Landscape*], because of course we're under competing pressures there... For purely market-based reasons, the journal sells copies because it sells in English, and most people who are researchers have access to that, to English as a second language at least... We ensure that every article comes with a second language abstract, so each one is accompanied by an abstract that's not in English to try to at least demonstrate, to gesture if you like, gesture towards

the fact that this is multilingual research. And as someone who tries occasionally to publish in my second language, I appreciate the value and the challenge that it brings to publish in a second language, but I don't really have an answer to how we can encourage that. I try to read in my second language, but there's no obvious way to expand that research base... One thing, just as a side point, is that I'm acutely aware, because I read all of the submissions to the journal before we go to print, and I have to police my own tendency to try and enforce standard English on the text... I don't have issues with people writing using American English conventions or British English conventions, that's not the point I'm making, but there's a very strong sense, for example- and I'm struck by this in some of the Southern African Englishes- that distinctive way of writing English, where I have to try and step back and say, no, this is...

Peck: ...right for them.

Blackwood: Yeah, and this works. And it is comprehensible, there's no loss of meaning or understanding there. It may not be how you would write it in British or American English, but this works as Botswana English. We should publish it as Botswana English.

Malinowski: I think that language teachers, people who are interested in language education, in linguistic landscape, are a very good subpopulation to work with. I've worked with communities of teachers of Hebrew at Yale, for instance, of Spanish, of Korean, of other heritage languages in the US and elsewhere, where there are strong teaching and professional communities of teachers who have conferences and publish among themselves ideas related to linguistic landscape. I've worked with the American Association of Teachers of Korean or Japanese and so on, and they have publications there [in other languages]. Now, are mainstream journals going to be widening the scope like the American Association of Applied Linguistics [AAAL]? The AAAL has recently started encouraging multilingual or non-English presentations. It's encouraging to see a lot of Spanish presentations here [at LL14] and so on. I think we can encourage it in multiple communities in multiple ways, but perhaps the dedicated [preexisting] professional networks who are committed to using non-English languages, at least in my own US context where English is so pervasive and the force of English is so great, is, I think, one area.

The interviewees consider the classroom an apt environment in which activism via the LL can take place. For example, Shohamy presented at LL14 about a project in which her students digitally altered signs to make them more linguistically just. Malinowski plans to carry out similar activities with his own students.

Shohamy: My passion is really to make students be aware of injustices in the public space... one of the things we’ve been experimenting with- that’s my paper on the last day- is about how people can change the linguistic landscape to make it more just and more inclusive, more equal in a way. So I think the whole idea of “I am able to change it”... I’ve written this [paper] because of the activism.

Malinowski: Elana [Shohamy]'s talk on Friday [about students digitally altering signs] is something that I'm also very interested in, which is transforming the linguistic landscape- activism, translation, and re-figuring, re-imagining... and engaging students in projects that don't just take for granted what's there, but act on it in some ways. I'm excited about that. I'm going to be working on that with students at San José State and beyond, and looking for ways to involve kids and more of our school communities in understanding and being involved in their communities, perhaps through a documentation of and thinking about some of their own language practices. Because we're so diverse, and it doesn't reach the surface of a lot of public discourse. So I think in a public education setting, there's just a lot of work to do.

When discussing how best to leverage LL as a pedagogical tool in language classrooms, there was a consensus that the LL is an excellent resource for teaching the social functions of language, and for showing students that actual usage among native speakers varies from the prescriptive norms taught in textbooks. The idea of what qualifies as language has expanded among LL scholars, and the interviewees encourage language educators to similarly extend their pedagogical frameworks beyond rigid phonological and morphosyntactic conceptions of language. Instruction that is limited to these components will not give students all the tools they need to fully learn a language.

Shohamy: I think language and everything around it, whether it's smell or other things that we are talking about... I think it's all language. And we just have to look. Babies sometimes take a year before they know the language, but they understand so, so much... So language cannot just be words... Sometimes I look at my classroom and there's not even one sign. Maybe the window that shows you that it's summer or winter, and that's all you get. But if you're outdoors, there're so many clues which could be considered language. And I think we have to focus on these. And I think this is really the great achievement of linguistic landscape- that we didn't stop. We saw right away in the 2006 book (Shohamy, 2006) that without these other things, there's no way to understand anything. You cannot understand a conversation without seeing the uniform of the person, if there are

uniforms. The grass on the field, the trees, the sky, everything that is around us. And I think in a way, this is the beauty of this field, that we are so comprehensive and [there are] so many things that we pay attention to. We're not limited to language as words. We've been a great group, and we go wherever it takes us. Or to what David [Malinowski] talks about: the bridge. We just cross the bridge to other places. And we ourselves are instrumental in expanding the meaning of language.

Malinowski: We happen to think [about] pushing or asking what language is and what are the limits of language, and that's a pretty valuable question... If you use the LL to teach vocabulary or grammar or systems of language, it's not worth it... When you start to get into the social functions of language, the pragmatics of language, the intercultural aspects, the understanding of your own self-development, and your own positionality in language and discourse, it starts to get a lot more interesting. I think linguistic landscape is fascinating for, just like Elana [Shohamy] was mentioning earlier, like she wrote about in 2008 with Shoshi Waksman (Shohamy & Waksman, 2008), starting to discover language that's on the sign as “tips of icebergs” to larger social, cultural, political phenomena, which as a language teacher, you want your students to be able to talk about, to understand, and to see how society functions. So if you believe language teaching is just about learning rules, grammar, learning the appropriate verb charts and vocabulary lists, I would say linguistic landscape is not perhaps the right way to go, because you would do a disservice to what linguistic landscape has to offer. But if you are a language teacher who is interested in cultivating cultural, social, political, and other sorts of consciousness, awareness, intercultural communication skills, pragmatics, and so on, then I think it's a fantastic resource... So LL work in language classes actually has a feedback process that challenges a lot of curricular assumptions [and] teaching approaches that see normativities and standards and so on.

Blackwood: For teaching undergraduates, who are, well in my case, they're always learning a second language, I think it's about, as Dave [Malinowski] said, this idea about learning what that means to use that language. As teachers, we've always indoctrinated in them a strong sense of normativity, and so when they go out into the streets as part of these modules, they're very quick initially to try and spot what they would call “mistakes”, and it's how you can then develop that, and help them think about the strongly normativizing tendencies that we as language teachers impose on them, but at the same time the realities of language production that goes on in the world around them, that obviously clashes with all that they've been taught. They obviously learn this to a great extent when they go abroad for part of their degree, and discover that the way in which they thought they'd learned

French, or German, or Mandarin, or Italian, isn't necessarily the way it's always spoken. Ditto the way it's not always going to be written in the ways in which we taught them.

Malinowski: I would build off of what Rob [Blackwood] said... about the French teacher who has a curriculum, and has a plan, and has an image of what French is and goes out into the environment and, “oh, crap, that's not spelled right.” And these [forms] are being used in ways that they never were intended to be. Well, by whom?

In a similar vein, Shohamy and Malinowski recognize that the confines of a classroom limit how much can be learned about any discipline. The LL offers students the chance to escape these confines and see real-world examples of what they are learning about in their courses. LL activities thus encourage students to apply their coursework to real-world problems, and also challenge them to ponder why some things they observe in LL fieldwork may be excluded from traditional classroom learning.

Shohamy: I just started two weeks ago an intensive class in linguistic landscape, and these are all international students. They know nothing about Israel; they don't know any Hebrew. The first class I told them, “just look around you, and try to figure out clues of something you can understand about Israel, even without knowing Hebrew”. They came back to class, and it's unbelievable, I mean they could read, they know everything, almost. They know already about the beach, they know about how things work, and so on. So to start with field trips, I wish we could do it all the time. Boring classrooms are not places to study, I really don't think so. We bring the environment [to students], the ecology, which is so big now, and look at places where the ecology is not taken care of, and try to see what [can be done] to change it. This makes you aware of the environment, because it is important now also... I think linguistic landscape emerged at the same time when we began to look at the ecology, and know that if we don't take care of it, not just about the green [spaces], but also the people around us, those people who are homeless in the streets, those people who are demonstrating... I think we are becoming more aware of others, those that don't know our language, those who can't really eat, those who don't have a place to sleep, and so on. So I think it's merging together with this big, chaotic, dystopic world we are all in now.

Malinowski: The primary object of learning in so many language classrooms is the spoken and heard language. And the ability to physically be or virtually be in a public space where a language is heard, is not available to lots of students who

are studying the language, right? If you study X language in Y location, the chance of it being spoken actively- you see lots of field trips, lots of Herculean efforts by teachers to try to bring students to where they can have multisensory experiences and so on. You can't get it all from a textbook, right? That's not available in some places. So there are a lot of efforts virtually to allow students to participate in other communities. The sort of raising of the status of the spoken language to linguistic landscape and thinking about the soundscape specifically as a linguistic landscape I think is a very important thing, not just for the exposure to the language, but also for the validation of that language as part of the linguistic landscape. In so many cases languages are spoken, but they're not visible, they're not written. Many students that I work with, for instance, their heritage languages are not [written]. So going out to communities, where do you hear the language? Where do you see the language? What other elements, what other sort of semiotic elements do you notice?... Language is so multisensory and so multimodal. And I think multimodality is being really welcomed in modern language classes in a lot of ways.

Furthermore, Peck and Shohamy emphasize that the LL is not restricted to outdoor signage. There are many ways for educators to incorporate modern technology that their students are constantly immersed in. Shohamy points to the LL as an apt source of real-world input for language classrooms from which students can comprehend a great deal, even in the initial stages of language acquisition when their production capabilities are limited.

Peck: One thing that really gets our first years [is] the virtual linguistic landscape, which is social media. It's on their phones. So we analyze memes, for example- South Africa is a meme-loving country- it's always multilingual, it's multimodal, and there's so much reflection because they go on a journey where they start to realize, oh my goodness, these are just constructions of my identity, and they fit into it. It's a fun way that learning through play can also happen at the age of 20. And because they're multilingual... those sorts of exercises really get them excited, and they learn, they actually learn who they are. So we need to select the meme, and then analyze it, so we also want to know why that meme over this meme, and so forth. So I do think LL has a lot to offer if you are willing to be creative, and to see social media as a tool for teaching and learning, not just a superfluous space.

Shohamy: I discovered some time ago that the best way to teach learning-[get] kids to look at the public space, teach them how to read, really. So if you have kids around, whether [in] kindergarten or in first, second grade, I mean, just take

them for walks and they start reading the signs... When they're like four or five, I see that. And that's really useful. So I'd say this is no question. It's something that can be acquired so early, let alone with visual[s], that kids when they are a year and a half already, they play with it, they look at movies, which is public space on the phones, and just walk around. The minute they start reading the sign on a subway or a bus, this is where you've got them. Since then, they know the public space exists... I think wherever we go, we don't even [have to] know a language. We get a lot of comprehension. I think the most important thing is communication and comprehension of what's going on around. And it's so much nicer. It's nice to watch a video when you don't understand the language and just try to see what's really going on. I think it's really part of comprehension. It's part of human behavior. The fact that some people decided it has to be standard and it has to be the [only] way to speak- I think it's criminal not to allow us to pay attention [to language as it's really used].

The analysis concludes with poignant remarks from Peck, who encourages skeptics of LL research to consider what the world would be like without the field's objects of study. The value of inquiry into artifacts in the public space derives from what they reveal about humans and society. If one were to take away signage and take away graffiti, one would take away the human. This is an indispensable point to consider as contemporary society trends toward the defunding, devaluation, and even elimination of humanities and social sciences programs.

Peck: Let's just remove all the graffiti we've ever seen, all the art. Let's take it further, remove art. Why do we even need other languages? Okay, let's just use English. We are living, breathing, creative people, especially in our discipline. And that is a strength that has been portrayed as a weakness. We love performances- it's art, it's culture, it's graffiti. If you take that away, you're taking away the human... There's a very harmful narrative globally about arts and humanities, and linguistic landscape also falls under that shade, so to speak... I say we are doing something that is important. We are not saving cancer patients, but we sure as hell are going out there and making sense of our world, and that's important. We need the poets, we need the graffiti artists, we need the actual scientists and those data people. But let's validate ourselves. So the next person who asks you [what the value of LL research is], just say, "okay, fine, remove all the graffiti". And just see the pain on their face, because the reality is that is a very boring, inhuman world.

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