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Review: Sociolinguistics: Backhaus (2007)

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Message 1: Linguistic Landscapes

Date: 02-Jun-2008

From: Mark Irwin <mark_irwin @ mac.com>

Subject: Linguistic Landscapes



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Announced at <http://linguistlist.org/issues/18/18-808.html>

AUTHOR: Peter Backhaus

TITLE: Linguistic Landscapes

SUBTITLE: A Comparative Study of Urban Multilingualism in Tokyo

SERIES: Multilingual Matters 136

PUBLISHER: Multilingual Matters

YEAR: 2007

Mark Irwin, Faculty of Literature & Social Sciences, Yamagata University

SUMMARY

The "linguistic landscapes" of the volume's title refer to the language on signs and, as its subtitle suggests, this is a detailed study of the language found on signs in several sample zones of the world's largest metropolis, Tokyo. The sociolinguistic sub-discipline of the linguistic landscape is a relatively new one, dating back to a study carried out in Brussels in 1978, and it is outlining the theoretical underpinnings and previous approaches to the field with which the first half of the volume concerns itself. In Chapter 1 ("Introduction", 1-3) the author points out that, while cities have always been places of language

contact offering fruitful results for sociolinguistic study both variationist and multilingual, the written language of the world's great metropolises has been until recently largely ignored. "Every urban environment is a myriad of written messages on public display: office and shop signs, billboards and neon advertisements, traffic signs, topographic information and area maps, emergency guidance and political poster campaigns, stone inscriptions, and enigmatic graffiti discourse. These messages bring together a variety of languages and scripts, the total of which constitutes the linguistic landscape..." (1). Backhaus's analysis of a Tokyo "myriad of public messages" makes up the second half of the volume.

Chapter 2 ("Semiotic Background and Terminology", 4-11) takes a theoretical look at the semiotic properties of language on signs: a public sign has meaning only in combination with its referent; unless interpretable a public sign has, in general, no meaning. The author discusses the Peircian notions of index, icon and symbol with reference to public signs, and Wienold's (1994) concept of 'inscriptions': "written uses of language which do not have a recognizable emitter and are not meant for special receivers" (8). A number of recent differing definitions of 'linguistic landscape' and 'linguistic landscaping' are examined, with Backhaus defending his decision to follow the more frequently cited formulation for the former of Landry & Bourhis (1997): "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on governmental buildings" (9).

Chapter 3 ("Previous Approaches to the Linguistic Landscape: An Overview", 12-53) is a lengthy one and, as its title suggests, summarizes previous research in linguistic landscape studies. The author makes two important points: that the relative youth of the discipline has meant that earlier studies have often been conducted in ignorance of similar research; and that interest has been particularly high in the linguistic landscapes of cities containing more than one distinct language group. The remainder of the chapter provides a detailed overview of this body of work, which includes studies carried out in Brussels, Montreal, Jerusalem, Paris, Dakar, Lira (Uganda), Rome and Bangkok. Also reviewed are four earlier studies on the Tokyo linguistic landscape which have examined script use on business and shop signs, language use in multilingual signs and Braille stickers and plates on public transportation.

Reflecting on the issues explored in previous chapters, Chapter 4 ("Summary", 54-63) offers some general observations on previous research and then considers the "three basic questions informing the study of the linguistic landscape" (57): linguistic landscaping by whom? (official versus non-official items); linguistic landscaping for whom? (who is the "presumed reader"?); and linguistic landscape quo vadis? The chapter closes with a discussion of some methodological issues: quantitative versus qualitative approaches, counting issues (the sign as one item versus semantic-based 'information units', 'cases', etc.) and issues of categorization.

Chapter 5 ("Case Study: Signs of Multilingualism in Tokyo", 64-140) makes up the second half of Backhaus's volume, the pun in its title belying the author's conclusions. The survey area for the case study was composed of the two-sided street space located close to the entrances of 28 stations on Tokyo's Yamanote Line, a circular railway line connecting the metropolis's multiple centres. These criteria allowed 10 of Tokyo's 23 wards to be sampled, with the street space covering a variety of different environments. A little under 12,000 signs were sampled, of which a total of 2,444 were categorized as 'multilingual'. These were then analyzed and discussed according to the languages they contained and their combination patterns, the differences between official and non-official signs ('top-down' versus 'bottom-up'), their geographic

distribution, part writing (availability of translation or transliteration), code preference, visibility, idiosyncrasies, and layering (the coexistence of older and newer versions of a given type of sign).

The author's conclusions are presented in the final chapter, Chapter 6 ("Conclusions", 141-146). In answer to the "three basic questions" posed in Chapter 4, his findings show that the multilingual linguistic landscaping of Tokyo tends towards non-official 'bottom-up' signage ('by whom?'); that the target group is non-Japanese in the case of signs providing translations or transliterations, but Japanese otherwise ('for whom?'); and that, although "Tokyo is a city that still predominately functions in one language" (145), "signs of multilingualism" (ibid.) are evident ('quo vadis?'). Returning to the title of Chapter 5, Backhaus claims that the city's linguistic landscape "can be read as reflecting the ongoing changes in the Japanese language regime... It can be seen that the country's much-quoted monolingualism is about to lose its relevance in a globalizing world. The uncontested role of Japanese as the national language and its ideological underpinning as the essence of being Japanese now increasingly face pressure, both from above and below" (146).

EVALUATION

Backhaus's volume is a welcome contribution not only to the study of linguistic landscapes and landscaping, but also to language contact and multilingualism in Japan. Of particular value is the detailed review of previous research presented in Chapter 3, which reveals a field with ample potential for future study and ample scope for future theoretical debate.

The categories according to which the multilingual sign corpus was analyzed in the case study in Chapter 5 can, in this sense, be seen as merely the tip of the iceberg. This reviewer, for example, found the author's analysis by "idiosyncrasy" (116-130) particularly stimulating. Any long-term English native-speaker resident of Japan will be only too excruciatingly aware of how her language is used, abused and misused on a regular basis – here Backhaus attempts to analyze this kind of language. He notes "double representations on toponymic signs" (e.g. 'Rikugien Garden' = 'Rikugi Garden Garden'), which he claims, probably correctly, is an "officially promoted strategy" (117); the use, non-use, and misuse of capitals (e.g. 'floor Guide'); orthographic errors (e.g. 'Alcohol'), many triggered by having been back-transliterated from Japanese transliterations of original English borrowings (e.g. 'Accusesari'); morphosyntactic idiosyncrasies, especially with respect to the plural (e.g. the ubiquitous 'LETTER POSTCARD' found on Japanese post boxes), the past tense of verbs (e.g. the 'CLOSE' for 'closed' found frequently on shop doors) and determiners (e.g. 'A Fire Extinguisher'); and semantic idiosyncrasies due to English words being used in their borrowed Japanese sense. This analysis is applied not just to English, but to Japanese (when transcribed in Braille or the Roman alphabet), Chinese and Korean as well. That other analyses and categorizations of idiosyncrasies may be possible, and such analyses and categorizations applied not just to multilingual signs in Tokyo but elsewhere, is a pleasing prospect.

Linguistic Landscapes is clearly structured, well written and requires little or no prior theoretical knowledge of linguistic landscape issues. It is virtually free of errors and typos, having clearly benefited from ruthless editing.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Mark Irwin is an associate professor at Yamagata University, Japan. His research interests include the historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, historical sociolinguistics and historical phonology of Japanese.

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