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Collecting Data for Linguistic Landscape Research

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Many researchers of linguistic landscape are also avid fans of photography. This is probably no coincidence given the essentially visual nature of the subject as defined in Landry and Bourhis's (1997) seminal article. However, collecting data for linguistic landscape research entails much more than taking pictures of signage. Before going out in the street with a camera, a researcher would also need to decide upon unit of analysis, geographic boundaries, length of engagement, etc. Depending on your research objectives, you might choose a qualitative or quantitative design, focus on one street or walk with participants throughout the city. With an expanded definition of linguistic landscape to include other modes of communication, you might choose to record environmental sounds or verbal interactions in addition to visual images. As with other kinds of sociolinguistic studies, whatever research design you choose, the most important thing is to ensure that it enables you to address the research questions that you set out at the beginning of the project.

At the early stage of their fieldwork, researchers often conduct a comprehensive survey of the linguistic landscape as a useful 'snapshot' to gauge the linguistic and demographic situations of the geographic area under study (Blommaert, 2013), which could be one or two streets (e.g. Gorter & Cenoz, 2006), a highway (Hult, 2014), a neighbourhood (Blommaert, 2013, Leeman & Modan, 2009; Lou, 2007; Papen, 2012), or even an entire metropolitan area (Backhaus, 2007; Huebener, 2006; Lai, 2012). Small contained areas are conducive for comparative or longitudinal studies, while larger areas are suitable for demonstrating the internal linguistic diversity, which will also require the selection of a few representative sub-areas. For example, to ensure a comprehensive coverage of Tokyo, Backhaus (2006)

collected data from streets near 28 metro stations on the Yamanote Line. Similarly, in Hong Kong, Lai (2012) chose one main street and one side street in each of the four distinctive sample areas where she and her research assistants collected data. You might also be interested in comparing the linguistic landscapes of two areas of similar size and nature, such as the two main shopping streets in Cenoz and Gorter's (2006) study of Friesland and the Basque County.

Once you have decided upon the geographic scale of your research project, you will then need to consider what counts as a unit of analysis. Would you need to capture every piece of written language on display, from billboard advertisements to handwritten flyers for lost cats, or are you only interested in one specific type of signs, for instance, residential property names (e.g. Jaworski & Yeung, 2010)? This decision, of course, depends on your research questions. An exhaustive sample might be feasible in a small, contained area, such as two shopping streets (Gorter & Cenoz, 2006) or the wall space of a science laboratory (Hanauer, 2009), but it might be challenging to carry out in most urban settings populated with signage. At the initial stage of my research project in Washington, DC's Chinatown, which is relatively small, I was tempted to capture every bit of language that I could find with my camera. Later when I learned that there was an urban design policy behind the shop front design, I decided to focus on the shop signs exclusively, to trace the trajectory of discourses behind its design. A visual survey of linguistic landscape could also provide rich materials for qualitative analysis, for example, Papen's (2012) study of graffiti as protest against urban gentrification in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin.

When collecting data for either quantitative or qualitative studies of linguistic landscape, the key is to take a clear picture of each sign to include legible language details as well as

sufficient contextual information. For shop signs, I would recommend that you use each shop front as the approximate visual frame (see Figure 1 for an example). This sometimes means that you will need to photograph the shop front from across the street. If you are interested in the other signage, such as notices, appearing within the frame, you will also need to step closer and photograph each sign individually. As depending on the size of each individual signage, we will be photographing them from various distances (a larger sign can be photographed from far away, while a smaller sign needs to be photographed up close), you would need to use a camera with optical zoom lens (digital zoom as on most smartphone cameras sacrifices image resolution considerably when zoomed in, so it is not recommended). This could be a digital SLR camera or simply a compact point-and-shoot camera. While the first offers more professional image quality, the latter is much more portable during fieldwork, and produces images of qualities that are sufficiently high for the purpose of linguistic landscape research. Most SLR or point-and-shoot cameras today could also take videos, which could be an additional perk if you are interested in including more semiotic modes, such as sound, into your research, as I will turn to discuss next.



Figure 1: A shop sign framed by the store front

One of the key developments in linguistic landscape research is the expansion beyond language to include other modes of communication. Hence, some researchers have preferred to refer to this subject of analysis as ‘semiotic landscape’ (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010), which significantly increases the scope of analysis to include not only elements integral of written language, e.g. colour, typography, but also aspects of the built environment which were not previously considered as part of linguistic landscape per se, e.g. war monuments (Abousnnouga & Machin, 2010) and memorials (Shohamy & Waksman, 2010). Kallen's (2010) chapter in the edited volume on semiotic landscapes also encouraged us to consider other mobile and temporary signs as parts of the semiotic landscape, e.g. brochures on the bus (see also Peck and Stroud's (2015) work on tattoos as skinscape). Chmielewska's (2010) chapter in the same volume also challenges the conceptualisation of linguistic landscape as a static background but something that is actively and continuously experienced by people on the move. Another key development in linguistic landscape research is the move towards a more contextualized view. Linguistic landscape is no longer analysed on its own but interpreted in its geographical, historical, and social contexts at the macro level (Leeman & Modan, 2009; Lou, 2009) as well as embedded in the everyday interactions at the micro level. Scollon and Scollon (2003)'s geosemiotic framework provides an adaptable approach to integrate the visual, the material, and the interactional dimensions of linguistic landscape.

Inspired by the phenomenological perspective on landscape and a more contextualised approach, I have in my most recent project in Hong Kong employed mobile video methods (McIllevey, 2015; Pink, 2007) with a GoPro action camera to trace individual participants' movement through various spaces in Hong Kong, thereby recording verbal interactions and soundscape of the city along with moving images of the linguistic landscape (Lou 2014,

2016). Eley (in preparation) pioneered the use of video camera glasses in her PhD dissertation research, which captures even more closely participants' dynamic engagement or disengagement with linguistic landscape with minimal intrusion from the researcher. Other scholars have pushed the scope of analysis even further to include semiotic modes beyond sight and sound. Most notably, Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) have studied the olfactory dimensions of corner shops. As to date, we still lack the technology to record smells using a machine, good old field notes become indispensable research tool to complement the photographic or video recordings.

Even though cameras or video cameras are the default tools for research on linguistic landscape, traditional sociolinguistic research skills, such as audio-recorded interviews, are still relevant and sometimes essential (see Davis and Hall-Lew & Plichta *inter alia* for advice on interviewing techniques and technologies). Garvin (2010), for example, pioneered the walking tour method by inviting participants to talk about the linguistic landscape of an area in Memphis while walking with the researcher. And to gain insights into the production processes, Malinowski (2009) conducted many in-depth interviews with Korean business owners in Oakland about the choices they made in shop sign designs. Zhu et al. (forthcoming) also interviewed a Polish shop owner about the use of language and space in his space.

While technological advancements have made it easier for us to collect multimodal data for linguistic landscape research, it is important to note in conclusion that capturing the images constitutes only one part of the complete picture. As cited throughout this vignette, more and more researchers are now turning towards ethnographic approaches to linguistic landscape,

which require emic understanding through longitudinal engagement with the communities under study.

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