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The Linguistic Landscape of Covid-19: Introduction

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June 2022, London King's Cross, in the middle of swarms of international travellers, regional commuters, and city workers, digital screens flash through advertisements for holiday destinations, 24 hour banking service, and Facebook's rebranding as Meta. June 2020, the same screens, in the nearly empty station, looped through advices for social distancing, face-covering, and thank you messages to NHS staff. Passing by the front of schools and churches in the San Francisco Bay Area in June 2022, one sees dozens of changeable letter signs cheerfully wishing their viewers to "Have a great summer!" and reminding them of upcoming in-person events. Two years prior, those very same signs pleaded with passers-by to "stay safe and stay home," with information about how to connect remotely via Zoom or Facebook. In the same year, the doorbell went silent at a home in Cape Town. It was no longer a signifier of an impromptu family visit or a long-awaited package to be delivered. While the silence denoted safety, it was also coupled with loss of loved ones. Fast forward to 2022: kids have grown and can play outside unsupervised. The doorbell started ringing again, and mom and daughter reunited in an embrace, unmasked.

Despite yet another spike of infection rates reported in the news, the linguistic and semiotic landscapes of the places we live in seem to suggest that life, as we know it, is 'back to normal'. Yet, it was only two years ago when many of us were convinced that 'this changes everything'. Having witnessed this stark contrast from three locations in the world, we, the editorial team, cannot help but wonder 'has anything changed at all?'

It was also about two years ago when we proposed the special issue on 'the Linguistic Landscape of Covid-19'. There was a sense of urgency then that pandemic signage was not only instrumental in the reconfiguration of the social as well as physical spaces we inhabit but also critical for the public health communication pertaining to the virus. The sentiment was certainly shared widely, as attested by the large number of sociolinguistic and social semiotic studies published since then (e.g. Adami et al., 2020; Jones, 2021; Zhu, 2020, 2021; Ogiermann and Bella 2021; Starr et al., 2021; Yao, 2021) and the over 40 abstracts we received for our call, including the 23 papers presented in the online workshop we organised in June 2021 (workshop papers available at: https://www.covidsigns.net/). Collectively, we attempted to address the following:

- How does Covid-19 signage (here and below understood to signify the nexus of physical signs and signing practices) (re)construct public space materially? How does it work with the built environment?
- How does Covid-19 signage visually represent the virus, people, and places affected by it? How does these visual representations reinforce or contradict the verbal messages?
- Who are the producers and intended users of these Covid-19 signs? Who are included, and who are excluded, through what means?
- How is Covid-19 signage intertextually linked with other broader discourses of public health, civic responsibilities, urban governance, consumerism, and neoliberalism?
- How does Covid-19 signage regulate bodies in space and shape interactional order? What new forms of behaviours in public have emerged as a result and become the 'new normal'?

While we certainly do not wish to claim that all of these questions have been comprehensively addressed in this special issue, we do believe that the ten papers selected here, besides the diversity of geopolitical contexts and the rigour of analyses, present a coherent group of responses to the central concerns driving the original proposal. Moreover, new theoretical and methodological insights have emerged from them, which will have enduring impact on linguistic landscape studies beyond the pandemic, as we outline below.

1.   Linguistic landscape as semiotic event

The Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented in many ways. In terms of academic research, perhaps no other world event has inspired as many publications of special journal issues and edited volumes across the fields in science, social sciences, and humanities. In the history of the journal of Linguistic Landscape, this is the first special issue in which all individual chapters focus on the same event. It is also unique in the sense that these ten studies were conducted as the pandemic was/is still unfolding around us, even though we had a faint hope a year ago that it would have ended by now. This event, as it turned out, also consists of an unknowable number of stages. It was therefore not surprising many of studies in the special issue as well as the online workshop have included observations of change in progress, whether it is the emergence of neologism on posters in Estawatini (Mkhatshwa et al., 2021) or the erasure of tourist signage from the cityscape of Florence (Bagna & Bellinzona, 2021). As Mourlhon-Dallies (2021) argues, the Covid-19 pandemic has foregrounded the temporal dimension of linguistic landscape (cf. Blommaert, 2013; Pavlenko & Mullen, 2015; Niedt, 2020), which has hitherto privileged a spatial perspective.

Among the papers in this special issue, Androutsopoulos's study explicitly engages with the question of temporality by utilising the notions of dispositive (Foucault 1978) and scale (Blommaert 2007). Based on qualitative coding of crowdsourced data collected in Hamburg, it compares how mask-wearing signs from the second wave of the pandemic formed an 'upscaled dispositive' from those collected during the first wave, including a different ensemble of speech acts, visual designs, material constructions, and producer-addressee relations. Also chronologically structured, Comer's paper traces the shift in 'affective-discursive practices' (Wetherell) across six lockdowns in Melbourne. Drawing on autoethnography and interviews with sign-producers, Comer documents how the messages of love, kindness, and positivity during lockdowns shifted to signs of relief, joy, and triumph since the end of lockdowns. Between these two chronoscapes (Baro), he argues, is a third, liminal space —which he calls during/since, where faded signs remained as reminders of resilience in the past and 'enregisterment of hope' for the future (Silva & Lee 2020).

Real-time change in the linguistic landscape is also observed in several other papers in the special issue, albeit less prominently. For example, Strange discusses how the public backlash against the discourse of blame in the NHS posters admonishing the public to wear face-masks during the third wave in the UK has let the government to soften its stance to the discourse of civic responsibility. And the participants in Tufi's study showed us how a micro-shift in the material and semiotic landscape inside their homes (e.g. a different mug, desk, room) could reconfigure spaces of life and work. While it can be challenging to research an event without knowing its exact contour, these studies have demonstrated that the continuous evolution of the pandemic has necessitated a temporal perspective from which linguistic landscape is no longer a static aggregate of semiotic and material objects but a semiotic event (or rather, a series of semiotic events), unfolding on multiple timescales.

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2.   Linguistic landscape as spatial resource

As an emergent response to the Covid-19 crisis, signage played an indispensable role in restructuring, managing, and regulating public as well as private spaces and spatial practices, thus affirming the now well-established position that linguistic landscape is as much about languages as about places (cf. Scollon & Scollon 2003; Jaworski & Thurlow 2010; Shohamy et al. 2010; Peck et al. 2018; Malinowski & Tufi 2020). The restriction imposed on travel and mobility during the pandemic has entailed a downscaling of analysis from larger urban areas (e.g. neighbourhood or city) to micro spaces of everyday life (e.g. bookshop in Karlsson 2021).

This is most evident in Douglas's study of community response and grassroots activism in the wake of the pandemic. As a sociologist specialising in informal urbanism, Douglas documented forms of temporary spatial improvisations in his local streets in Oakland, such as community cafés made of a sofa and a few chairs, socially distanced celebrations and festivals, and a repurposed Town Fridge to share food with those in need. The handmade signs attached to these seemingly random grouping of material objects turned them into meaningful spaces of social interactions. Moving the analytical gaze from the public to the private, Tufi's photo-voice project gives a rare insider's view into how home spaces were reconfigured to accommodate work during the lockdown. Although there is no visible inscription in her data, it was through talk and action that borders were created, reinforced, or transcended, and material objects in the offline space became part of the 'semiotic landscape' of online meetings. 'Bordering practices' (Malinowski & Tufi 2020) were also discussed by Phyak and Sharma in their analysis of exclusionary signs created by citizens and community associations to restrict outsiders' access to certain spaces in Kathmandu, thus providing a stark contrast to other community-based practices characterised by solidarity and conviviality. On the other hand, Milak's observations of mask-wearing practices in Seoul demonstrate how the action of unmasking challenges and negotiates the boundary between public and private spaces defined by governmental regulations communicated in posters.

3.   Linguistic landscape as affective discourse

Although focussing on the same global event, the papers presented in this special issue and the preceding workshop from about a dozen geopolitical contexts remind us that the societal responses to the crisis are inextricably linked to cultures and discourses mediated through the linguistic landscape. While some signs convey solidarity, kindness, and care (e.g. Comer, Douglas), others are coloured by fear, threat, and precarity (e.g. Milak, Pyak & Sharma, Modan & Wells). They also demonstrate how the 'affective regimes' (Wee 2016, Wee and Goh 2020, Niedt 2020) in Covid-19 signage are shaped and reshaped by the broader socio-cultural discourses they are embedded in.

Complementing the urban focus in most linguistic landscape studies (though see Jenks 2018), Zhou's paper in the volume examines the semiotic landscaping of Chinese villages as ad hoc means of rural governance. Collecting data from social media, Zhou observes how the threatening and admonishing tones of red banners and loudspeaker announcements turned them into humorous entertainment when they were recontextualised in online spaces. Such divergent keying, she argues, fits within the consumption of tuwei wenhua ('earth-flavoured culture') by urbanites. The intertextual connection between affective discourses was also the analytical focus of Theng, Tse and Wu's paper. They examine how the official Hong Kong government slogan 'united, we fight the virus' was variably resemiotised in Covid-19 signage made by small business, thus subtly displaying their ideological alignments under the circumstances of

tightening political control and censorship. Contrasting most studies in the special issue where governments at various levels exerted controls over public spaces through linguistic landscape during the pandemic, Modan and Wells's close look at shopfront signs in Adams Morgan, Washington, DC shows how small businesses and individual labourers have had to bear the economic burden of the pandemic in a city where urban governance has been decentralised over the years.

Conclusions and methodological reflections

In sum, we have outlined in this brief introduction several key insights that have emerged from the 11 papers on Covid-19 signage in different parts of the world. Given the abundance and ubiquity of signs, the relationship between linguistic landscape and the pandemic is evident. Yet, we hope the discussion above has also convinced our readers that this is not a form of academic 'newsjacking', as some might suspect. In addition to providing us with an empirical lens through which we can better understand the impact of this global pandemic on social norms, spatial practices, urban governance, and civic and corporate responsibilities, research on the linguistic landscape of Covid-19 has also produced enduring lessons for our field beyond the pandemic. It has implored us to attend to the temporal, spatial, affective, and discursive aspects of linguistic and semiotic landscapes. These developments were already set in motion before the pandemic, but we would like to suggest that their pace was quickened by this global health crisis.

Researching an event as it was happening has also required us to adapt our research methods to travel restrictions and reduced face-to-face contact. Many studies in this special issue focussed on the local neighbourhood and streets (e.g. Douglas; Modan and Wells; Phyak and Sharma) or even the interior domestic spaces (Tufi), while others gathered data from crowdsourcing app (e.g. Androutsopolous) or online platforms (e.g. Zhou), thus further enriching the methodological toolbox of linguistic landscape research (Blackwood, 2017). The downscaling of research sites also entails that it has been increasingly difficult to separate the observer and the observed (cf. Szabo and Troyer, 2017). In fact, autoethnography has been embraced by several authors here in this collection, most notably Comer as well as Modan and Wells, who have demonstrated poignantly the value of documenting researchers' own emotional responses to signs for the discussion of affective landscape of the space and time we live in. Here we would also like to acknowledge the emotional labour poured into these studies by the authors in this special issue and at the online workshop, in spite of the many personal challenges brought by the pandemic.

Although Covid-19 signage might have faded or even disappeared from many parts of the world, we have to remember that the pandemic is an ongoing event, and as the recent harsh lockdown in several Chinese cities attests, travelling freely without restriction is still a privilege. There are several aspects of the linguistic landscape of Covid-19 that deserve more discussion in the future, for example, the linguistic and social inequality reflected in and mediated by pandemic signage (cf. Hopkyns and van den Hoven, 2021; Zhu 2020, 2021), and the impact on public health communication (cf. Jones, 2013), among others. We hope the thematic threads emerging from this collection will be continued in future studies and contribute to the development of the field of linguistic landscape studies in general.

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