

The Semiotic Landscape of a Multicultural Illiterate Society of Ethiopia

Rukya Hassen (PhD)

Asst Prof of Applied Linguistics and Com'n, Wollo University

Abstract

This study is about the semiotic landscape of a multilingual illiterate society. The semiotic landscape of the monolingual literate, modern and developed societies have extensively been investigated. Writing remains to be the dominant mode of semiotic landscape in the modern world. A typical characteristic of illiterate society is that they do not use writing. They have long been using many other forms of semiotic landscape for generations. The semiotic landscapes are also used as a regular communication signs across different language speakers. Semiotic landscapes used by the multilingual illiterate society of Ethiopia are investigated in this study. Since the majority of the people in Ethiopia are illiterate, there are many semiotic signs used in different displays in the public space. Since written language comes with literacy, it exclude the illiterate part of the society. Although it is inevitably replacing the traditional semiotic landscapes in the urban areas, the long-lived modes of semiotic landscapes still persist in the rural areas and some urban spaces as well. The data collection sites were Kemisie, Dessie, Wogdy, Addis Ababa and Woldia. 5670 pictures were taken from these places. Analysis were done based on the types and functions of each image. The result of the study shows that there are many semiotic landscapes that have continued to be used by the primitive society of Ethiopia. These signage were used for generations and are still being used along with written languages. The researcher noticed that many of them are being replaced by written languages. It is worthwhile to document and analyze how illiterate societies represent their public spaces using different semiotic resources.

Keywords: Semiotic landscape, multiculturalism, sign, illiterate

1. Introduction

1.1. Study Background

This is a study on the semiotic landscape of a multilingual illiterate society in Ethiopia. The illiterate society does not use writing. Instead, they use different audio-visual signs to represent their communication displayed in the public space. They have long been using many other forms of semiotic landscape for generations. The semiotic landscapes are also used as a regular communication signs across different language speakers. These signs trespass the linguistic boundary across the different speech communities in the country. Semiotic landscapes used by the multilingual illiterate society of Ethiopia are demonstrated in this study.

Ethiopia is a land of diversity where many ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups of different kinds co-exist. There are many languages spoken in the country. Different cultures are exhibited through ways of dressings, living, eating and day-to-day activities. The majority of the people belong to Christianity and Islam in religion, and Oromo and Amhara in language-based ethnic group. There is a lot of cultural and linguistic diffusion among the various groups because of contact. An extended and cherished relationship has been formed among the different ethnic groups of the country through migration, intermarriage and assimilation (Levine, 1971:13). The total population of the country according to the 2007 population census was 73,918,505.

Ethiopia is one of the multilingual countries of the world. The ethno-linguistic make-up of Ethiopia is complex. There are more than 75 ethnic groups in Ethiopia of which some languages are represented in the written linguistic landscape and many are not. Since the majority of the people in Ethiopia are illiterate, there are many semiotic signs used in different displays of public places. Written language is a recent phenomenon and it does not include all parts of the society. Although it is inevitably replacing the traditional semiotic landscapes in the urban areas, the long-lived modes of semiotic landscapes still persist in the rural areas. Traditionally, the most common semiotic landscape is by using traditional multimodal displays. The data collection sites were Kemisie, Dessie, Wogdy, Addis Ababa and Woldia. 5670 pictures were taken from these places. Analysis were done based on the types and functions of each image.

1.2. Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study is to explore the semiotic landscape of the multilingual community of Ethiopia. Specifically, the study aims at investigating the:

1. types of semiotic landscapes,
2. meanings and symbols of the semiotic landscapes and
3. functions of the signs used.

1.3. Research Methodology

Signs: The signs taken for the analysis of this study are traditional displays that are common for both literate and illiterate and that trespass the boundary of linguistic groups. The approach of collecting data involved taking digital pictures of the displays in the public space.

Research context: The research context covers wide geographic coverage of the country in five towns. The semiotic landscape investigated are from areas in Kemisie, Dessie, Wogdy, Addis Ababa and Woldia. The corpus of this study includes an inventory of the semiotic landscape of major traditional signs in the streets of the selected towns.

Analysis: Variety of pictures of displays that are common across many cultural groups and that are common for both the literate and the illiterate society are selected for the analysis. The criteria for selecting signs for analysis include the type of sign, the commonness of the sign across many groups, the commonness of the sign across the literate and illiterate society.

2. Linguistic/Semiotic Landscape

Scholars in the field such as Backhaus state that linguistic landscape research is a relatively young sociolinguistic sub-discipline (Backhaus, 2007:3). In sociolinguistics and applied linguistics there is a growing interest in linguistic landscape (Gorter, 2005:81).

According to Cenoz and Gorter (2006:67) the perspective of analyzing languages in context by focusing on the written information that is available on language signs in a specific area is known as linguistic landscape. It is defined as:

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. The linguistic landscape of a territory can serve two basic functions: an informational function and a symbolic function (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 25).

Many scholars in the field agree that linguistic landscape (LL) is written discourse in the public space (Landry & Bourhis, 1997:25; Chrismi-Rinda, 2010:128). It is mainly understood as written language as posted in different displays of public space. According to Cenoz and Gorter (2006:67), the perspective of analyzing languages in context by focusing on the written information that is available on language signs in a specific area is known as linguistic landscape. The definition of LL as a written discourse is narrow and hardly representative. This does not correspond to the LL of multilingual community in the vast majority of the illiterate society. This conception cannot accommodate the LL situation in the illiterate multilingual society such as Ethiopia.

Moreover, linguistic landscape has been understood as the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region (Landry and Bourhis, 1997:1; Cenoz and Gorter, 2006:67; Chrismi-Rinda, 2010:13). However, there are many LL signs that do not involve any language in the multilingual context of Ethiopia. In the displays, there are many non-linguistic signs that do not require literacy. The definition of LL related to written signs is only a recent additional characteristic feature of traditional society.

‘Linguistic’ is only one, though extremely important, element for the construction and interpretation of place (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2009:1). There are many non-language ‘stuff’ that we use to serve this purpose. All landscape is semiotic, i.e. its meaning is always construed in the act of socio-cultural interpretation (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2009:1).

Semiotic landscape, broadly speaking, refers to any public space visible inscription made through purposeful human intrusion and different social practices (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2009:2).

Semiotic Landscape (SL) investigates the content of publicly visible signage (David, 2011:7). LL enables the researcher to take the perspective of sociolinguistics further and study the phenomena of variation, language contact and code mixing from a different angle (Muth, 2008:129). The linguistic landscape or parts of the linguistic landscape can have an influence on language use (Cenoz and Gorter, 2006:68).

The study of the linguistic landscape is particularly interesting in multilingual contexts (Cenoz and Gorter, 2006:68). The study of the linguistic landscape(s) of a geographically confined area proved to be a useful tool in analyzing patterns of language use (Muth, 2008:143).

Linguistic landscape refers to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region (Landry and Bourhis, 1997:1; Cenoz and Gorter, 2006:67; Chrismi-Rinda, 2010:13). It may serve important informational and symbolic functions as a marker of the relative power and status of the linguistic communities inhabiting the territory (Landry & Bourhis, 1997:1).

The semiotic landscape is discourse in the public space, and the study thence investigates linguistic choices and the motivations behind these choices (Chrismi-Rinda, 2010:128). Examining such displays accessible to everyone give us an insight into function, status and spread of a certain language (Muth, 2008:121). LL/SL are ideologically based and serve important functions in the (re)presentation of identities (Curtin, 2007:201).

3. Types of the Semiotic Landscape

3.1. Sound as a Semiotic Sign

There are some public signs that are revealed through sounds. For example in Figure 1, a sign of mill house is shown. The sign used to display the mill house is the sound the grinding creates. There is no written poster or any other sign to advertise the mill house. The grinding sign is the only signage used to show the presence of the mill house. The video sign shows how it sounds the mill house.



Figure 1: (Mill House) sign, Addis Ababa, Ferensay and Coffee grinding sound in houses
The grinding sound around neighborhoods signals the presence of coffee. Many neighborhood fellows use this signage as a call for coffee ceremony.

3.2. Hand Washing Container or Jar as a Sign of Restaurant

In traditional restaurants, there is no written poster to advertise the presence of a restaurant. As shown in figure 2 and 3, a hand washing container or jar is put right at the outdoor of the restaurant.



Figure 2: Restaurant Sign, Dessie



Figure 3: Restaurant Sign, Kemisie

In many places in the research areas, such signage is used as the sole indicator of the presence of a restaurant without any written signs.

3.3. Hanging the Object as a Sign

Commonly used semiotic sign for both the illiterate and the literate is to hang the sign itself right in front of the service area. Figure 4 shows the sign of a key to show the presence of a key house behind it.



Figure 4: Key Shop Sign, Dessie

3.4. Putting the Object and Its Measurement Outdoor

Just like what is shown in figure 5 below, to sign the presence of a crop shop, the crop and its measurement is placed at the outdoor of the shop.



Figure 5: Crop Shop, Dessie Sherf Tera

People understand from the scene that there is crop to be sold in this house.

3.5. Putting the Worn-out Material out to Show Repair House

Another type of semiotic landscape used in the multilingual illiterate society of Ethiopia is to locate the worn-out materials out to show the presence of a repair house as revealed in figure 6. The figure signs the existence of a wheel repair house.



Figure 6: Wheel Repair, Woldia

3.6. Putting Cup out to Sign Bar

As shown in figure 7 and 8, a cup is culturally known as a sign of the presence of a local alcohol-selling place. This is particularly used to show the presence of a local drink known as 'Bukri' in fig 7 and 'Tella' in fig 8.



Fig 7: Bar/Alcohol House Sign, Dessi



Fig 8: Bar/Alcohol House Sign, Wogdy

The cup is the material used to drink the alcohol. It symbolizes the presence of a traditional alcohol in this house.

3.7. Hanging the Preparing Material to Sign Bar

To signify the presence of a local alcohol house known as 'Tejj', the following material is hung right in front of the house.



Figure 9: Bar, Dessie.

This material is used to prepare the local alcohol. People who pass by this signage understand that this is a bar.

3.8. Putting the Substance Open to Sign it

To sign the presence of a substance known as ‘Chat’, the substance is put out like what is shown in fig 10.



Figure 10: ‘Chat’ (local substance) Shop, Kemisie

This substance is put on show to signal the presence.

3.9. Displaying the Complete Ceremony Out

To show the presence of a coffee house, the coffee ceremony is put on view on market as shown in fig 11.



Figure 11: Coffee House, Addis Ababa

The whole material of a coffee ceremony is on show to signal the presence of coffee prepared using local coffee pot.

3.10. Serving and showing to a large crowd instead of to individuals



Figure 12: Weeding feast, Wogdy

During weeding feasts, people serve the food collectively. The meat is put to show. This signage is shared in some areas to some extent.

3.11. Displaying the material in front of the house

There are also semiotic landscapes specific to a certain area. The following is one example of such signs.



Figure 12: House material sign, Wogdy

In Wogdy and around Borena, there is a tradition of putting a house building material, such as what is shown in Figure 12, to signal the capacity of one to build a house of his own. The material is put by a young boy to signal his readiness that he can build a house of his own and ready to marry. This signage is only shared around Borena.

4. Functions of the Semiotic Landscape

Signs in multilingual public areas serve as a useful tool to find out more about the functions these different languages fulfil within specific contexts. There are different functions that the semiotic landscape serve to the society who use them. Some of the functions include the following.

4.1. Mediate linguistic as well as literacy barriers

The displayed signage play a symbolic role besides the informative function. Examining such displays accessible to everyone give us an insight into function, status and spread of a certain language (Muth, 2008:121). When the signage is used by many parts of the society including the literate and illiterate, it becomes inclusive. LL has a limitation in this regard since it makes use of linguistic resources to signal the landscape. Semiotic Landscape makes use of both language and non-language ‘stuffs’ available in the society to represent the public space.

4.2. Indexicality of Semiotic Landscape

Indexicality is inherent in the semiotic forms (Llamas, et al., 2007:16). Language indexes something else. Johnstone (2008:133) said, “Almost any aspect of human interaction can function indexically”. For researchers who want to investigate the functional aspect of a language, Dell Hymes (1964:167) says, “to what extent and in what ways is a language an index of its associated culture, should be of considerable interest”. Linguistic variation, as indicated elsewhere, does not occur without a purpose. Mesthrie (2009:146) also agrees with this when he said, the idea that language varieties are meaningful: they index, or point to a speaker’s origin or of aspects of their social identity (for instance, their social class or ethnic group), but they also carry certain social values related to the speakers who use them and the contexts in which they are habitually used. Language varieties therefore constitute a meaning-making resource that may be drawn on the interaction with others.

Linguistic forms, besides their literal meaning, indicate other implied ‘social’ meanings. (Johnstone, 2008:133). Some of the indexes include the following.

4.2.1. Identity

our sense of national or regional identity is closely linked to the nation’s collective gaze at the physical attributes of landscape, especially the pictorial, cartographic and textual representations of the countryside. (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2009:2).

SL are ideologically based and serve important functions in the (re)presentation of identities (Curtin, 2007:201). The LL is thus a powerful mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, and also of expressing and creating identities (Chrismi-Rinda, 2010: 9). Such a case occurs when written language is used. In the case of non-linguistic signs, the sign belong to all linguistic groups. Besides, there are different traditions and values operating behind particular artistic representations of landscapes (Coupland, 2010:77). The shared values on the displayed signs become common and extend the relationship among the diverse community. The signs play a great deal in this regard.

Different political regimes, social structures, cultural performances and historical occurrences leave their mark on the SL (Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:20). The SL is a cultural scene, formed by agents who may or may not be

authorised to do so, and who have different motivations and intentions (Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:26).

The dominance of a specific language in the LL indicates the power and status of a majority or strong minority group over other groups (Chrismi-Rinda, 2010:26). The symbolic function of the linguistic landscape lies in the choice of message, and more specifically the choice concerning language, on public signage (Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:28). The choice is deliberate.

All semiotic systems operate as systems of social positioning and power relationship both at the level of interpersonal relationships and at the level of struggle for hegemony amongst social groups in any society precisely because they are systems of choice and no choices are neutral in the social world (Scollon & Scollon, 2003: 7 in Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:28).

Multilingual signage reveal hidden patterns that reveal different identities. Some of the multiple identities indexed by the signs are the following.

4.2.2. Local Identity

Semiotic landscape displayed in local signs put local identity on view. While LL shows how the marginalized languages and the prestigious languages share the public space, SL shows how the local culture/group control the public space. The SL/LL is thus a powerful mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, and hence also of expressing and creating identities (Chrismi-Rinda, 2010: 9). SL shows how the prestigious culture/group dominates the rest.

4.2.3. Collective Identity

Advertisement signs displayed in common signs put collective identity on view. This could be a way of seeking and/or expressing worldwide identity. As noted by Curtin, “Key social semiotic processes of indexicality and iconicity in language orthographies in the negotiation of residents' local, regional, and (trans)national identities” (Curtin, 2007:1).

4.2.4. Solidarity

The symbolic function of the semiotic landscape relates to its capacity to contribute to a positive social identity of the group whose signage is used by affirming the value and status of that culture and leading the group to feel included in the society (Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:29).

4.2.5. Norm of Interaction/ rules or Policies of communication

Semiotic landscape can also be considered a reflection of policy and rules people govern themselves with. Shohamy (2006) discusses that the LL is a language policy mechanism:

(T)he presence (or absence) of language displays in the public space communicates a message, intentional or not, conscious or not, that affects, manipulates or imposes *de facto* language policy and practice. Thus, the presence (or absence) of specific language items, displayed in specific languages, in a specific manner, sends direct and indirect messages with regard to the centrality versus the marginality of certain languages in society. The display of language transmits symbolic messages as to the legitimacy, relevance, priority and standards of languages and the people and groups they represent (Shohamy, 2006: 110 in Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:29).

The fact that the sign is private or government has been identified to be significant factor for the functions, ideology and other roles the sign is meant to serve.

Private signs include commercial signs on storefronts and business institutions (e.g. retail stores and banks), commercial advertising and billboards, and advertising signs displayed in public transport and on private vehicles. Governmental signs refer to public signs used by national, regional, or municipal governments in the following domains: road signs, place names, street names, and inscriptions on government buildings, including ministries, hospitals, universities, town halls, schools, metro stations, and public parks (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 26f in Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:34).

5. Conclusion

Written signs are exclusively used for literate people. The illiterate society have long used visual and audio signs before the coming in to being of writing. The above signs are some of the types of signs used by the illiterate society of Ethiopia. The types of the semiotic landscapes are multifold. They make use of audio and visual resources that could be accessible to many parts of the society including children and elderly who are illiterate. The functions served by the semiotic landscapes are multifold. They mediate literacy barriers; they index other functions besides the informative purpose they primarily serve and they reflect the norm and rules of interaction/communication in the society. Such use of semiotic landscape is very common in the illiterate society.

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