

media constructs and exercises its power by paying attention to the way information is filtered and represented, how ideology is recoverable through analysis of lexical and syntactic choices and how news stories are structured in order to present a particular point of view. Individual choices (at the level of lexis and syntax) interact with each other and build to a single interpretation of the facts. What counts as an expert in the mass media was also considered. This demonstrates that experts are constructed by the media, and that expertise is not something a person has, but something they are given. This construction of expertise can also be seen when considering Twitter and the citizen journalist. We have also explored the way the traditional media producers choose what to cover. The concept of 'news values' explains why news producers consider some events to be newsworthy while others are not. The move of mass media from print-based publications to the World Wide Web has changed some aspects of news production and consumption. However, it is important to remember that even though information is presented through a different technology, the linguistic and ideological choices made are still relevant. Indeed, given the fast pace of news online, the power that such media exerts is even stronger. The more we understand about how mass media works, the better we can adjust our literacy practices and therefore our understanding of the texts we consume.

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### NOTE

- 1 Thank you to Karla Pandelius, who sourced the original print edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

## CHAPTER 5

# Linguistic landscapes

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 1, we considered the question 'What is language?' In this chapter, we are concerned with the question 'Where is language?' Language is all around us. When we speak, we use language; when we write and read, we're also using language. Recently, linguists have become particularly interested in the use of language in the everyday semiotic landscape, in what might normally be considered banal or mundane contexts. We begin by explaining what the linguistic landscape is, and in contrast to the abstract signs we investigated in Chapter 2, we explore types of concrete signs and their authors. We consider multilingual linguistic landscapes, the ideologies and power hierarchies that signs communicate and the different meanings of graffiti. The importance of the virtual landscape and the different meanings of how signs communicate in this context as well as how the division between online and offline linguistic landscapes is collapsing.

### 5.2 DEFINING THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

In cities and towns around the world, there is an abundance of linguistic and other **semiotic** material. Alongside official signage indicating street names, traffic regulations and building numbers, there is a wealth of material that people may or may not pay attention to. Advertising billboards, posters and handwritten

Scholars working in the field of linguistic landscapes (LL) and semiotic landscapes (SL) have directed their attention to the use of language and other meaningful objects in the construction of space. It's worth taking a moment to think about what 'construction of space' means.

Imagine you're blindfolded and taken to a public space somewhere. When the blindfold is removed, how would you know where you are?

### Activity 5.1

In the scenario in Activity 5.1, you would probably quite quickly figure out what kind of place you were in. You might look for street signs, the names of roads and directions to other places. From this, you may be able to orient yourself. If you happened to be placed in another country, you would be able to deduce this simply from the way the signs were composed, from their typeface, colour and size. You might look for shop signs, to try to find something familiar. If you found yourself inside a building, the surroundings may also indicate where you are. You would probably be able to tell if you were in a government office, for example, or a bus station. Language and other semiotic features help us understand what kind of space we're in.

Research in LL studies the way 'linguistic objects . . . mark the public space' (Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Mara and Trumper-Hecht, 2006: 7) and the '*symbolic construction of the public space*' (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006: 10, emphasis in original). In the introduction to the first issue of the journal *Linguistic Landscapes*, Shohamy and Ben-Rafael write:

The main goal of LL studies is to describe and identify systematic patterns of the presence and absence of languages in public spaces and to understand the motives, pressures, ideologies, reactions and decision making of people regarding the creation of LL in its varied forms. (2015: 1)

For example, researchers might consider signage, the languages in which they are written, who produced them and to whom they are directed. It is useful when looking at the linguistic landscape to draw a distinction between official and non-official signs. Official signs are usually produced by the government, local councils or the owner of a building or site. The messages that they convey can be described as 'top-down' discourses (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006: 10). In contrast, signs produced by individuals or small groups can usually be identified on the basis of the message and the form of the sign. These can be described as 'bottom-up' discourses. Image 5.1 is an example of a top-down message because it is posted by the government. In Wales,

this use of 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' does not relate to the placement of English and Welsh on the sign itself.

The difference between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' discourses can be seen in Image 5.2 and Image 5.3.

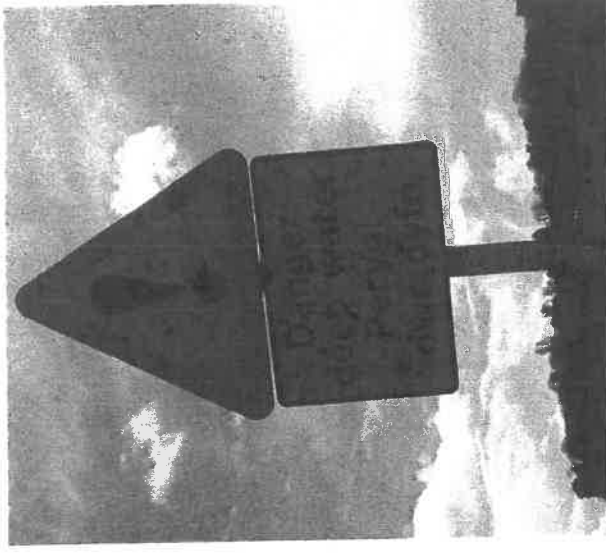


Image 5.1 Bilingual Welsh sign





Image 5.3 Hand-drawn no smoking sign

Immediately, one can see that Image 5.2 is an official sign. The standard typeface, the normal no smoking icon and the reference to 'this station and its platforms' immediately communicates that it is official and a top-down discourse. It has been professionally produced, and the use of the passive, 'have been designated', points to the authority authoring the sign. In addition to asking people not to smoke, it demonstrates its authority to make such a request. Note, however, that there is actor deletion. We have to infer who the authority is.

In contrast, the picture in Image 5.3 is a hand-drawn sign on a single piece of A4 paper. It is immediately identifiable as a bottom-up discourse. This sign was posted outside a university building, next to an official no smoking sign. It would be reasonable to hypothesise that this sign has been created by an individual wanting to add their voice to the official signage on the same wall. It is then possible to interpret it as a personal plea not to smoke in this space.

Kress and van Leeuwen argue that we can apply strategies to further interpret visual material. Specifically, we can treat it in a similar way to reading written texts and think about it in terms of given and new information. We discussed this in relation to Greek word order in Section 2.3.3. Given and new is about the **syntagmatic** structure of language. In writing, we expect a writer to start with what is already known or 'given' before moving to new information. We can transfer this understanding to visual signs. Thus, the left-hand side of an image or a page can be understood as 'given' and that on the right as 'new' (1996). Kress and van Leeuwen argue that we can

understand content at the top as 'ideal' and content at the bottom as 'real'. This works particularly well for large billboards or full page advertisements in magazines. The claims for the product will often be at the top (ideal) while information about how to contact the vendor will be at the bottom (real). These strategies do vary across cultures, however, because of different reading practices; not all languages are written left to right. As Scollon and Scollon caution, 'there is always a danger of overgeneralising from closely situated semiotics to broader social, cultural, or universal categories' (2003: 159–160).

In analysing the linguistic landscape, we also have to consider the paradigmatic access of language and transitivity analysis (see Section 2.6.1). That is, in order to determine what the sign means, we need to think about the other choices that have been made (in terms of words, images, colour and so on). Further, if there are people represented, you can also ask 'who is doing what to whom' and apply a kind of transitivity analysis to the image.



Image 5.4 Harrogate sign

In Image 5.4, the public are told  
RESTRICTIONS ON DRINKING ALCOHOL APPLY IN THIS AREA

Analyse the words in Image 5.4 using transitivity analysis. What does this suggest about the author of the sign and its purpose?

We can see that this sentence is quite hard to deal with, as there are no people in it. Someone must have authorised the restrictions, but we have to go outside the main message to see that it was authorised by Harrogate Borough Council (Harrogate is a town in England). The line at the top 'Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001' is also part of this authorisation. Councils have to invoke a particular kind of legal authority in order to impose restrictions like these. In this case, the council draws its authority from a law: the Criminal Justice and Police Act.

If we isolate the verb, 'apply', we can see that 'restrictions on drinking alcohol' is in the position we normally find an *agent* (a person doing something). But it's not really an agent. The *circumstances* are straightforward, 'in this area'. If we were to have an agent, the sentence would have to be something like 'Someone has applied restrictions on drinking alcohol in this area'. But we have to reconstruct the agent, Harrogate Borough Council, from outside the sentence.

Visual signs, and legal signs in particular, have their own structure. As members of a community, we usually have the necessary literacy (see Section 4.1) to figure out whether a sign is official or not.

### 5.2.1 Space and meaning

The signs in Images 5.2 and 5.3 both tell us something about the space in which they are located and about the sign maker. Paying attention to the features of these signs enables you to attend to the 'symbolic functions of language [which] help to shape geographical spaces into social spaces' (Leeman and Modan, 2009: 336). The very presence of the signs alters the space where they are found. The meaning the sign conveys also depends on where it is placed. This is why Scollon and Scollon emphasise the 'material placement' of signs as a key concern when analysing them. They call this mode of analysis *geosemiotics*.

**Geosemiotics:** the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs in the world. By 'signs' we mean to include any semiotic system including language and discourse. (Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 110)

Where a sign is placed tells us something about its meaning and the intentions of the sign maker. It is also worth noting the importance of where signs are placed in two other respects. First, signs need to be well-placed in relation to the information they convey. We have all had the experience of looking at a sign with an arrow and not being sure where it is pointing. The **deictic** nature of these signs means they need to be carefully placed in order to fulfill their informative function (see Denis and Pontille, 2010): 'the sign *only has meaning because of where it is placed in the world*' (Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 29 emphasis in original). A stop sign in the middle of a field, even though it has all the features of an official traffic sign, has a very

All of the signs and symbols take a major part of their meaning from how and where they are placed – at that street corner, at that time in the history of the world. Each of them indexes a larger discourse whether of public transport regulation or underground drug trafficking. (Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 2)

This is particularly clear in terms of regulatory and top-down signs. As we saw in Image 5.4, official signs index, that is, they point to, the authority able to create and place these signs. Moreover, the placing of signs can define a boundary.

Mautner argues that physical signs can function as 'boundary markers ... playing an important part in carving up space into public and private areas, and into zones where it is permissible to enact some social roles (e.g., cyclist or angler), but not others (e.g., busker or dog-walker)' (2012: 190). The drawing of these boundaries depends on the deictic function of signs. We can see this boundary drawing in Image 5.4. It is rather vague 'in this area'. But this phrase nevertheless marks out a space. Sometimes, we have to infer the space being referred to.



Image 5.5 No ladders

Image 5.5 is a photo of a sign on a lamppost. The sign can't possibly be a prohibition on the use of ladders in general, and so we infer that it is telling us not to use ladders on this lamppost.

As well as creating boundaries and defining space, signs index other meanings, discourses and messages. As we noted earlier, Scollon and Scollon suggest that signs index a 'larger discourse' (Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 2). For example, the no-smoking signs (Images 5.2 and 5.3) point to at least two other discourses. The first is the rather widespread ban on smoking in

public buildings and even on public streets. The presence of a conventional, official no smoking sign indexes the laws that brought these bans into effect. The second discourse is the stigmatisation of smoking. Since widespread smoking bans have taken effect, smoking is now a more stigmatised practice than it was. This may explain the hand-drawn image in Image 5.3. In any case, the illegality of smoking in many places has perhaps made it more acceptable to ban it in other spaces.

In public spaces, people are often urged to behave in a particular way. Whether this relates to putting rubbish in bins, covering your mouth when coughing or safely crossing the road, many of these interventions are useful in spaces with multiple users. Traffic signs, to take the most obvious example, allow road users to co-exist in a reasonably safe manner. While traffic signs play an important regulatory function, they also provide motorists and pedestrians with a clear understanding of what is appropriate and what is not. The line between law and good behaviour in this domain is not always clear. A pedestrian can cross a road without a designated crossing in many countries without breaking the law. They may nevertheless be breaking the rules of what counts as good behaviour from a pedestrian. In other transport domains, particularly public transport, signs may urge passengers to behave in appropriate ways. In order to have maximum effect, these signs may be organised into a wider campaign.

All signs, but particularly top-down official signs, structure space through boundary marking and by indexing other discourses. Such structuring of space is an exercise of power and is ultimately ideological. This does not mean, however, that it might not have positive intentions or effects.

### 5.2.2 Different kinds of signs

To understand the range of signs we encounter in the linguistic landscape, considering the distinction between top-down and bottom-up, even with attention to materiality is not enough. Scollon and Scollon (2003: 217) provide four categories of discourses that signs invoke:

- Regulatory discourses – traffic signs or other signs indicating official/legal prohibitions
- Infrastructural discourses – directed to those who maintain the infrastructure (water, power etc) or to label things for the public (e.g. street names)
- Commercial discourses – advertising and related signage
- Transgressive discourses – 'a sign which violates (intentionally or accidentally) the conventional semiotics at that place such as a discarded snack food wrapper or graffiti; any sign in the "wrong space"' (Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 217)

Note that these categories may overlap. The hand-drawn no smoking sign in Image 5.3 does seem to be regulatory. But as it's not top-down, it can also be

considered transgressive. If we consider these categories together with the other characteristics we have considered, it is possible to be quite specific about the kinds of signs we find.

The next time you leave your house, try to document the signs you encounter on the way. This can be done on even a very short journey – and this is preferable, as some spaces have a great proliferation of signs. Note the signs you see and mark on a map where you found them. How many are official top-down signs? How many are bottom-up and of what kind? It may help to use Scollon and Scollon's four categories. What does this tell you about the space you're in? What kind of people are in the space? What kinds of activities take place there?

### 5.2.3 Top-down and bottom-up as a continuum

It is not always easy to know where to draw the line between top-down and bottom-up. Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), for example, suggest the signs on individual shops are 'bottom-up', as these allow for personal choice in their composition and display (2006). However, within the context of the shop itself, they could be regarded as top-down. Leeman and Modan (2009) argue that the

distinction between top-down and bottom-up signage practices is untenable in an era in which public-private partnerships are the main vehicle of urban revitalisation initiatives in urban centres in many parts of the world and when government policies constrain private sector signage practices. (2009: 334)

Nevertheless, if the distinction is thought of as a continuum whose orientation points may shift in different contexts, it is still helpful in understanding how signs are constructed and consumed.

The distinction between top-down and bottom-up can also be supplemented by other factors in order to figure out how to read the sign. For example, the materiality of a sign may give some clues to its status and legitimacy. This is the case with the sign in Image 5.3 (the hand-drawn smoking sign). However, sometimes official signs, authored by the government or a local government body, depart from semiotic choices we may associate with top-down discourses, as in Image 5.6. The text on this sign, found in a nature reserve, appears to be informational. But the semiotic choices are playful and child-like. The background is black, and the words are in different pastel colours (suggesting chalk on a chalkboard). We know it is an official sign, however, as it has 'rspb' in the bottom left-hand corner – the acronym of the UK's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

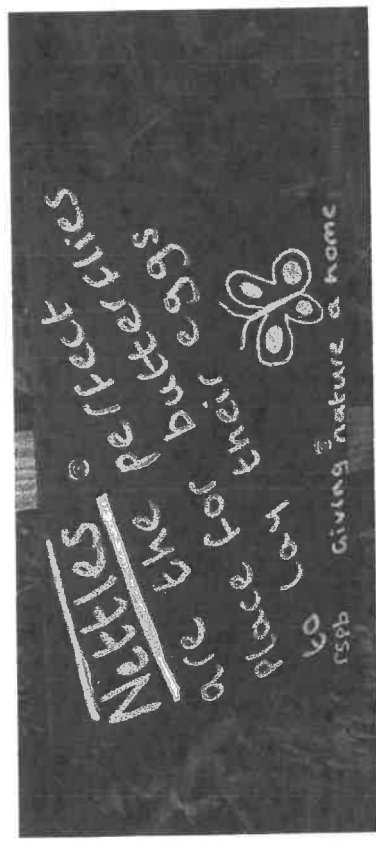


Image 5.6 Nettles

The next sign, image 5.7, is also an example of an official and top-down sign.



Image 5.7 Littering

Rather than tell people what the penalties might be, this sign seeks to shame them into not littering. The list of choices given for why one might litter are hardly flattering, and we are not given an 'Other' choice. The humour here may well draw people's attention and result in their compliance. This style of persuasion is not expected from an official sign.

It is also likely that we attend to signs with specific features more than we might otherwise. The sign in Image 5.8 was found in a women's bathroom in a theatre in Vancouver, British Columbia. The fact that it is metal and screwed to the wall tells the audience it is permanent and therefore, perhaps, important. The use of a standard serif typeface and the use of the symbol conventionally used to prohibit something (a red circle with a line through it) all suggest that authority stands behind what is ultimately a request to consider the experience of others.



Image 5.8 Ladies' bathroom sign

Image 5.8, the sign in the women's bathroom urges women to be considerate of other patrons. This kind of signage doesn't specifically prohibit something; rather, it asks the audience to behave in a particular way. Public transport spaces also contain many such signs. See if you can find examples on buses, trains or trams or in transport hubs (bus and train stations, bus stops and so on).

Sometimes, the top-down and bottom-up are found on the same sign. This is clear when an official sign (top-down) is altered in some way by the public (bottom-up). These alterations may pass judgement on the authors of the sign and their actions or on a social issue of wider significance (see Image 5.9).

Additions to signs such as the one in Image 5.9 and Image 5.10 bear some resemblance to graffiti. Whether or not you think such alteration is acceptable depends very much on your attitude to the original sign and to the intervention of individuals in public sign space. We consider this in the following.

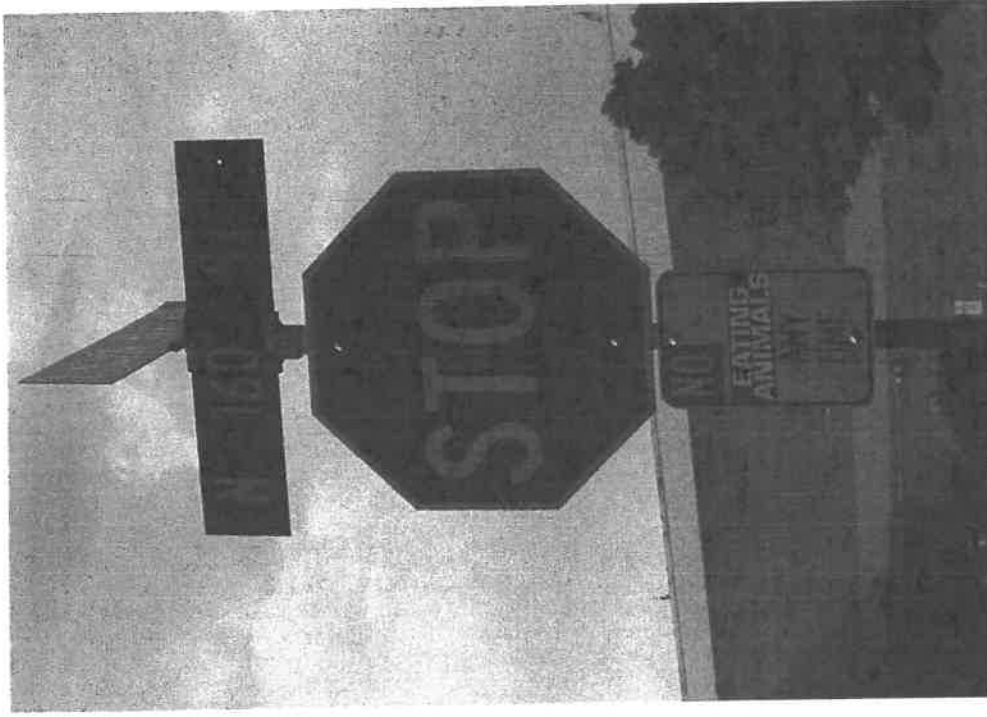


Image 5.9 Stop sign

Image 5.10 was taken in Barcelona.<sup>1</sup> Maps provided by the city in the street (presumably to help tourists navigate the city) have had large stickers added to them. These stickers have a skull and crossbones and the words 'Tourism kills'. The choice of English for this message suggests that the intended audience are not the local people but rather tourists themselves (given the state of English as a global lingua franca, see Chapter 10).

Image 5.9 and 5.11 exploit the conventions of top-down signs to creatively intervene in the everyday space of signs. What is particularly striking about examples like this is that the audience may not immediately notice that there has been an intervention. Because traffic signs are part of our everyday semiotic landscape, we expect to see signs telling us to stop or give way or indicating the speed limit. Therefore, we don't read them in detail because



Image 5.10 Tourism kills



Image 5.11 High fives: Ryan Laughlin

nature of traffic signs in order to disrupt the everyday LL. This may well be entertaining and invite passers-by to look at their environment in a new way and may also critique the top-down control of the built environment.

### 5.3 SIGNS AND MULTILINGUALISM AND POWER

Scholars studying LL are often concerned with questions of multilingualism and uncovering the everyday communicative strategies of the people who actually use a particular space. It is important to consider a whole range of signs and semiotics in relation to each other, across a landscape. This is particularly valuable when considering power. Considering multilingualism in LL can also tell us about the languages used by inhabitants of those spaces and whether this 'matches' up with the 'official language'. While multilingualism is a rich field of research in LL, we can explore it only briefly here.

In Image 5.1, we saw a sign from a nation that is officially bilingual. The inclusion of both Welsh and English on this official, top-down sign shows that there are now two official languages in Wales (May, 2011). Official recognition of a language is an important marker of power and acknowledgement by those in authority. In places where the official language is contested, the languages included on this kind of top-down signage is a subject of intense debate (Heller, 2006). Official language policies represent all aspects of the linguistic landscape (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). Nevertheless, regardless of what those in power claim about the linguistic profile of their community, the linguistic landscape is a testament to the languages actually being used in a place. That is, it may not be the case that the only languages used in a community are the 'official' languages and close examination of the linguistic landscape can reveal languages that would otherwise be invisible.

#### 5.3.1 Invisible language

Some research on linguistic landscapes focuses on the range of different languages with specific attention to their presence and the ways they are used. This can provide insight into linguistic diversity not captured by official top-down discourses or even by official audits (e.g., a census). Blommaert (2013) describes the linguistic landscape of his local community in a part of Antwerp, Belgium. This area, Berchem, is 'predominantly Turkish and Belgian ... both groups being the most visible (and audible) ones there' (2013: 46). While he notes that there has been some Chinese migration to the area, 'it is not Chinatown' (2013: 46). When conducting his ethnography, however, he documents a handwritten sign in Chinese script found in the window of an empty shop. It advertises a flat to rent. Because it is written in Chinese, it is clearly addressed to a Chinese audience. But careful examination shows that its meaning is not straightforward.

The Chinese sign is written 'in a mixture of traditional Mandarin script (used in, e.g., Taiwan, Hong Kong and most of the traditional Chinese

diaspora), and simplified script (used in the People's Republic)' (Blommaert, 2013: 46). Blommaert points out that this may suggest that the author is not fully competent in either form or is trying to accommodate to a likely audience. Because this sign is placed on the inside of a window, it communicates more than simply a flat for rent. It adds to the semiotic landscape and claims ownership of the space in which it is placed (even if only a very small space) (Blommaert, 2013: 46), suggesting an emergent, or otherwise invisible, Chinese network.

Multilingualism in a community may have several sources. We show how this might happen by considering the language and sign choices in Image 5.12.



Image 5.12 Mondo Macho

Image 5.12 was taken in Arles, France. From the sign directing people to hotels, we can already deduce something about this place. The names of the hotels are in French; we know we are in a French-speaking area (though this need not be France). That there are directions to six hotels suggests that this is a tourist area. The design of these signs suggests they are not made by each individual hotel; they are not just advertising signs, or commercial signs in Scollon and Scollon's terms. They are more like official street signs, directing people to the relevant local tourist infrastructure – hotels. They have an 'informing' function (Blommaert, 2013: 54).

The shop front in the background, however, is a form of advertising, with a 'recruitment' function (Blommaert, 2013: 54). This shop sign, like many others, announces '(a) the kind of transactions performed in that place, (b) the kinds of audiences targeted for such transactions' (Blommaert, 2013: 54). Shop signs take many different forms.



Have a closer look at the signs for hotels and the shop front in Image 5.12. Did you notice the other texts? How would you classify them?

Activity 5.12

There is also some regulatory text on a barrier behind the hotel sign. Whether this barrier is out of place (waiting to be moved to and thus regulate another space) or whether it belongs there is not clear from the photo. Finally, there is more text on the shop window. Unlike the signs painted on the glass, one is written 'femme' (woman) directly on the glass by hand and the other has been written on a piece of paper and then fixed to the inside of the window. This sign is in French, 'Boutique a vendre', communicating that the shop is for sale. As this is written in French, it seems to be addressed to the local, rather than tourist, population.

## 5.4 SIGNS AND IDEOLOGY

So far we have considered single instances of signs. But signs can also be part of a broader multimodal communicative strategy or movement. The following example features the Umbrella Movement to show how the linguistic landscape influences and is influenced by public participation. The Umbrella Movement refers to a grassroots pro-democracy protest that took place in Hong Kong over four months (September to December) in 2014. The protest involved hundreds of thousands of protesters occupying several sections of Hong Kong for 79 days as a reaction against changes to voting eligibility that had been made in Hong Kong. The movement is an example of a bottom-up organisation that has no formal leadership or structure but that nevertheless was able to mobilise thousands of people and attract global attention.

While other 'Occupy' movements have described themselves in terms of the places they occupied (e.g., Occupy Wall Street), the name 'Umbrella Movement' was picked up early in the events because protesters used umbrellas to protect themselves from tear gas and pepper spray used by police (Lou and Jaworski, 2016: 611). This long and heated protest had an impact on linguistic landscapes in Hong Kong. Lou and Jaworski report:

[T]he Umbrella movement was marked by an intense production and display of signs, posters, banners, flyers, stencils, graffiti, stickers, cartoons, comics, scrolls, road signs, petitions, photographs, postcards, personal messages, post-it notes, prayers, artworks (including sculptures

and installations, children's art, chalk drawings etc.), t-shirts, board games, newspaper pages, maps, flags, toys (e.g. toy umbrellas), jewelry (e.g. necklaces with beads and yellow ribbons), balloons, and wide range of other ephemera.

(Lou and Jaworski, 2016: 612)

The wide and varied placement of these items in addition to a range of temporary structures constructed by the protesters in the occupied neighbourhoods changed the nature of the space that was being occupied.

Many of the protest signs were written in Cantonese. This is the most frequently used language in the city despite its status as 'merely a "dialect" when spoken and a "non-standard" variety when written' (Lou and Jaworski, 2016: 614). Using Cantonese for the signs is therefore a significant choice (ibid). In addition, some signs were written in English, perhaps suggesting that protesters were addressing English speakers in Hong Kong or even global audiences. Not only was the protest covered by international news media, it was live-streamed and people shared images and thoughts on social media and blogs and YouTube films (ibid).

Another common sign in the UM read 'I want true universal suffrage' (我要真普選; Lou and Jaworski, 2016: 637). The sign included a simple umbrella shape at the top with #umbrellamovement at the bottom. It was originally in the form of a very large banner and was hung at Lion Rock (October 23, 2015).

The location of the banner's first appearance is highly charged for Hong Kongers as it evokes 'Lion Rock Spirit' which used to represent the resilience and unity of grassroots Hong Kong society in the face of hardship during the 1970s and 1980s while Hong Kong was still a British colony. (Lou and Jaworski, 2016: 637)

The significance of this initial placement is thus imbued in the meaning of the sign. The 'Lion Rock' sign was widely reproduced and used in various places. These uses were in turn documented and shared on social media. Together with the umbrella, it became the 'default slogan' of the movement.

The umbrella was interpreted in a very different way by the police, who saw it as a weapon. This argument, however, fuelled parody through the sharing of clips from martial arts films in which an umbrella is used as a weapon (ibid). As Lou and Jaworski note, the umbrella became an icon; it was turned 'from a mundane object and a tool of self-defence to a symbol of the movement' (2016: 634–635). It can be considered a 'brand' for the movement (Lou and Jaworski, 2016: 635) in that it was widely taken up, easy to produce, reproduce and recognise. As mentioned, it was also turned into a commodity that could be purchased in acts of positive affiliation. Lou and Jaworski explain that the symbols of the movement were co-constructed. That is, while people shared documentation of the actual protest online, material originally produced online also made its way into the physical protest space.

The re-interpretation of the umbrella image was so consistent and so widespread that what this image means has fundamentally changed so that, in addition to referring to an object that protects one from the rain, in Hong Kong (and those spaces that are connected with the UM, whether in the 'real' world or online), the umbrella now has an additional meaning.

### 5.5 TRANSGRESSIVE SIGNS: GRAFFITI

We defined a transgressive sign 'as a sign which violates (intentionally or accidentally) the conventional semiotics at that place, such as a discarded snack food wrapper or graffiti; any sign in the "wrong space"' (Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 217). Here, we focus on one kind of transgressive sign, graffiti, in order to demonstrate some of the different meanings it can have. We're especially interested in transgressive signs because they provide marginalised people a voice in public space. Transgressive signs thus provide a measure of agency for people without conventionally recognised power.

Carrington (2009) notes that graffiti is 'an unsanctioned urban text', one that 'sits in direct competition with the sanctioned texts displayed in the production of commercial advertising, shop front signs, street signs and noticeboards' (2009: 410). The fact that graffiti is present at all may suggest that the space is contested in some way (see Image 5.9). And while Carrington describes graffiti as 'vernacular', we can also understand it in relation to the bottom-up scheme described earlier. As these signs are not top-down, they allow the viewer to see the contributions of other people to the built environment. Graffiti points to the existence of people engaged with their environment in an active way.

A sign may contain both 'commercial graffiti' and 'non-commercial graffiti' (Lee, 2000 cited in Carrington, 2009: 411–412). The former is 'about authority and control of public spaces and buildings in a consumer culture and can be found on most city surfaces' while 'non-commercial graffiti' is 'an alternative system of public communication' (Lee cited in Carrington, 2009: 411–412). Both mark out space and ownership of space. Both comment either on that space or the world more generally. But while we generally know how to read commercial graffiti and generally agree on how it should be understood, not everyone reads non-commercial graffiti in the same way. One of the key differences between them is that commercial graffiti is paid for; the textual space is purchased in some way and is therefore considered to be legitimate.

Carrington argues that the 'imperative for these ways of writing on the city revolves around voice, identity and space' (2009: 417). Graffiti seeks to claim back space that has been colonised by commercial signage for ordinary people to mark and comment on the spaces they inhabit.

It is loud: it screams from the walls 'I am here and I want you to know'. It screams 'I don't respect your boundaries – textual or spatial'. It is hyper-visible – large, messy, prominent, strategically transgressive, dismissive

of private ownership and corporate power – and therefore directly reminds us of the inter-medial nature of text. Our eyes see its visual qualities as well as convert it to meaning chunks.

(Carrington, 2009: 418)

Graffiti is a way for disempowered people to make a visible mark, to disrupt the landscape that is increasingly occupied by the more and more powerful. Carrington argues that it creates a **narrative** and is a form of 'participatory culture'. The people who live in the space provide evidence of their experiences, views and actions. In this sense, it is a form of citizenship, not unlike the silly citizenship described in Chapter 3. It allows for the visibility of a hidden community and allows this community to see itself in its environment.

### 5.6 ONLINE LANDSCAPES

The division between 'online landscape' and 'physical landscape' is becoming harder to distinguish. This means that the linguistic landscape isn't confined to the physical landscape. The blurring of the distinction between the physical world and the online world can be seen in the Pokemon Go phenomenon that occurred in July 2016. Pokemon Go is a game that uses a mobile phone to find and 'capture, fight and train' different Pokemon creatures. Participants can view the virtual creatures placed in the physical world by looking at the screen of their mobile phone, which produces a virtual visual overlay of the Pokemon creatures onto the users' current physical world. The creature therefore appears to be present in the same physical world of the user at that moment. Other examples that blur the line of physical landscapes can be found in museums where exhibits are enhanced by allowing visitors to integrate exhibit material with physical reality (see, for example, <http://startrekblackpool.co.uk/>).

In Section 5.2–5.5, we considered how, as you walk through the street, you are exposed to an abundance of linguistic and other semiotic material which we call a linguistic landscape. In the same way, when you engage in online searches, online shopping, social media, computer-mediated communication and so on, you are 'walking through' a virtual landscape where you are exposed to linguistic and other semiotic material. Seeing the online environment as a landscape allows us to pay full attention to the semiotic choices made by the actors within that space as well as the new spaces created in these environments. In addition, this virtual landscape is further embedded in the 'real' linguistic landscape as we juxtapose our electronic communication devices with the material world. For example, people tend to take their mobile devices with them and check them often when they are at work, with friends or walking down the street. It seems, therefore, important to consider the online environment as part of the 'public space' we move through as a linguistic landscape.

In Section 5.2, we noted some of the key features that we look for in linguistic landscapes, such as patterns of language and signs in public spaces,

top-down and bottom-up discourses, emplacement and ideology. We can find online parallels to several of the features in the linguistic landscapes of the material world.

The online landscape and the signs found there, however, may require some different analytic tools to those used before. For example, the platforms used to deliver information have a variety of effects on how the virtual linguistic landscape is constructed and interpreted. To understand the ideologies, power hierarchies and potential for agency found in the online linguistic landscape, we need to understand the different kinds of virtual spaces, how they are constructed and what users can do with them. We'll see that there is much more scope for bottom-up discourses and the creation of personal narratives because social hierarchies are somewhat 'flattened' online. In addition, the large number of 'observers' and the global reach of online landscapes complicates the design and consumption of signs online.

### 5.6.1 Twitter

Having discussed Twitter in Chapter 4, we can think here about how this platform as a virtual landscape has changed our linguistic landscape. The types of 'signs' one finds in this virtual landscape depend on the platform but also on the choices the user makes. An individual's experience of Twitter, for example, will depend on who they are following, which hashtags they are interested in and so on (see Section 4.7). Moreover, the way people use Twitter can vary widely. It may be used for keeping up with developments in your work and career, making sure your train is running on time, following your favourite singer or interacting with friends. Twitter, and other online platforms, provides opportunities (though always with some limitations) and resources for making choices in how we create a personalised linguistic and semiotic landscape. Gillen and Merchant refer to these choices in terms of constructing a 'point of view' (2013: 51).

The different ways people use language (e.g., T. Jones, 2015) or what people think about language is sometimes visible on Twitter. Vessey (2016) discovered a range of language ideologies (see Section 2.5) when she researched Tweets made about a controversy in Montreal (2016). The controversy involved the owner of an Italian restaurant, Massimo Lecas, and the fact that he had included the English word 'pasta' in his menu. Because the official language in Montreal is French, he received a letter from the Office Québécois de la Langue Française (OQLF) objecting to his use of English and other 'linguistic offences' in the menu. Lecas shared a photo of the letter on Twitter and Instagram. A local journalist raised interest in the story by retweeting and reporting on the story on his radio blog, resulting in it becoming an international story referred to as 'pastagate'.

Vessey's analysis of the Tweets about pastagate found that the OQLF policies were mocked, and many expressed profound disagreement with the actions of the OQLF. This was, of course, not universal. Some questioned the behaviour of restaurant owners, but others expressed the idea that French

needed to be protected from English (see Chapter 10). Vessey argues that this suggests 'evidence of ideologies of language endangerment, which presume that some languages require protection (and, indeed, that it is possible to protect them) because of ecological factors that threaten their existence' (2016: 20). Vessey also found a form of standard language ideology (see Section 1.4) in that 'a small number of French Tweets suggested that attention should be paid to the quality of French in Quebec...' (2016: 20).

The pastagate story had serious effects. The head of the OQLF resigned, and policy changes subsequently took place. Moreover, as Vessey writes, 'more than a year later the term [pastagate] is still frequently used to index anglocentric perspectives on Quebec news and events...'. Vessey continues:

What began as a story about one menu in one restaurant turned into a way of opposing language policy more generally, and Quebec politics too. (2016: 20)

As it is public, however, 'Like many social network sites, Twitter flattens multiple audiences into one – a phenomenon known as "context collapse"' (Marwick and boyd, 2011: 122). A tweet you compose with a friend in mind may nevertheless be read by your boss. This means that communicating on Twitter is quite different from engaging in a conversation with visible participants. The Montreal restaurant owner likely didn't consider that his tweet might be shared and be read by a larger audience than his own followers. Some users are more aware of this context collapse. Marwick and boyd explore how people with large followings on Twitter 'manage' their audience and construct their own identity and found that while some tweeters report that they do not have an imagined audience in mind, others carefully design what they tweet in order to construct a particular identity in this context. And while the Twitter users that Marwick and boyd interviewed placed value on 'authenticity', they also engaged in self-censorship (not tweeting about some very personal things) and balancing personal information with more strategic posts (e.g., for building a brand or professional identity).

### 5.6.2 Instagram

Instagram has attracted much attention from scholars who view it as a good candidate for the kind of semiotic analysis that we use in relation to visual signs. Instagram is a digital platform for sharing visual material. As such, it is an interesting example of a virtual landscape. Instagram users post photos and short videos accompanied by hashtags (see Section 4.7).

Like on Twitter, Instagram users can follow and respond to other users. The most commonly shared images in Instagram include self-portraits, friends, activities, captioned photos, food and gadgets (Hu, Manikonda and

Kambhampati, 2014). Sheldon and Bryant (2016) suggest four main purposes for using Instagram:

- 'Surveillance/Knowledge about others' – to find out what was going on and who was doing what and to interact with people
- 'Documentation' of users' own lives
- 'Coolness' – to construct a particular kind of identity
- 'Creativity': 'showing off one's skills and finding people who have similar interests' (2016: 93)

Sheldon and Bryant find that surveillance is the main purpose people use Instagram. As a means of information seeking and as a means of social interaction, it is an important part of the online linguistic (and visual) landscape. 'Documentation', 'Coolness', and 'Creativity' seem to suggest that users who create content on Instagram are motivated by the ability to present their own point of view (Gillen and Merchant, 2013: 51) about themselves and other topics in public space. The more flattened nature of hierarchies online allows people to do this in a way that is different from how it is done in the material world.

The point of view is certainly partly constructed by the image posted. The ability to tag posts with hashtags also helps to communicate a point of view. Instagram posts are tagged with hashtags (as in Twitter), but the convention in Instagram is to have more hashtags attached to a post than in a tweet. This makes it possible to convey both information and a personal view on that information. For example, Matley (2018) shows how users are able to post positive news about themselves without seeming to indulge in too much self-aggrandisement by including the hashtags #brag and #humblebrag. This allows the poster to signal that they are bragging, but because they are conscious of this bragging, the less attractive elements of this activity are reduced.

Multiple hashtags also allow users to tell a story. While the purpose of the (multiple) hashtags is to increase the number of people who see and pay attention to the post (as it is possible to follow and search for hashtags), they can also be put to other uses. Here, as with other forms of digital media, it is possible to apply the 'small stories' framework. While a narrative (a 'story' for our purposes) usually has a beginning, a middle and an end and takes some time to tell, a small story is rather more compact. Georgakopoulou describes the small story as follows:

under-represented and 'a-typical' narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell. (Georgakopoulou, 2006: 130)

That is, small stories may be fragments of what we might normally think of as narrative. Given the ~~multimedial~~ nature of Instagram it is possible to tell

a (small) story simply with an image and some hashtags. For example, you might post an image of a sunny sandy beach and attach the hashtags #holiday, #familytime, #livingthedream, #Barbados. The hashtags and the image allow your readers to know that you are on holiday in Barbados, relaxing on a lovely beach with your family and having a wonderful time. While the post may not look like a **narrative**, it provides enough in the way of information that a reader can reconstruct a story.

Like the Tweet from the restaurateur in Montreal (Section 5.6.2), sometimes the identities and narratives on Instagram are contested. In 2017, the wife of a US government official posted on Instagram a photo of her husband and herself getting off a US government aeroplane and included the following hashtags:

#daytrip, #Kentucky!, #nicest, #people, #beautiful, #countryside,  
#rolandmouret pants, #tomford sunnies, #hermesscarf, #valentinorockstudheels, #valentino, #usa

Presumably, the woman's purpose was what Sheldon and Bryant (2016) call 'Coolness' or identity construction. However, the post was harshly criticised for the hashtags describing her very expensive designer clothing. These hashtags were perceived by some viewers as an inappropriate flaunting of wealth by the wife of a government employee. The controversy was fuelled by further commentary as it spread via other forms of digital media. Thus the linkage of online platforms allows broader access to each of the platforms (e.g. those without an Instagram account nevertheless hear about those stories). This example also demonstrates the importance of 'material placement' (geosemiotics) in online linguistic landscapes. Imagine the reaction of an audience if the photo and hashtags had been posted on a blog for *Vogue* fashion magazine. The space in which the message is posted dramatically affects its meaning.

### 5.6.3 Emoji

Emojis are a good example of signs in the online landscape, as they can be seen as signs in terms of linguistic landscapes and in Saussure's terms (see Chapter 2). Emojis can be understood as the next generation of emoticons because they emerged from the use of emoticons. Emoticons draw on symbols available on a standard keyboard that are combined such that it is read as an image. For example, :) communicates a happy face. As technology allowed users to incorporate more sophisticated images in texts, emojis became widely used in digital communication and therefore a common feature of virtual landscapes. While these signs communicate emotion (e.g. through facial expressions), emojis may also appear to reference things (e.g. bunnies, telephones or food). However, what specific emojis communicate may well vary from person to person. Friends, for example, may have a 'secret language' of emoji that they use only among themselves. Indeed,

in contrast to the assumption that the face emojis are the carriers of affect and emotion, Riordan (2017) found that even non-face emojis communicate emotion. She reports that it seems that even though such non-face emojis can't change a message from negative to positive, they nevertheless 'show many of the same effects as face emojis' (2017: 562). Emojis are now so much a part of our culture that there is a World Emoji Day (17 July). And far from indicating a decline in linguistic ability, Evans (2017) argues that emojis make people more effective communicators.

An important role that emojis have is to take the place of paralinguistic information. What might be conveyed with tone of voice, facial expressions or body language in a face-to-face setting may be conveyed through emoji. Thurlow calls this 'paralinguistic restitution' (see Chapter 8). Though emojis can perform paralinguistic restitution, Riordan (2017) reports that they are not always easy for a reader to translate and understand. Riordan (2017: 5) also points out that emojis can be 'seen as deliberate emotion expressions' and thus may not be understood as authentic. She explains:

[T]he inclusion of a smiling emoticon at the end of a message is a deliberate act, which is understood more as an expression of feeling that may or may not be actual feeling. In that way, the emoticon is akin to the oft-used 'LOL' in which it is understood that the person who wrote it is not actually 'laughing out loud'; the cue serves as a polite response, an expression of intimacy by informality, a method of self-presentation, sarcasm, or other nonaffective relational purposes.

(Riordan, 2017: 5)

### 5.6.4 Memes

The quick circulation of 'memes' (see Section 4.8.2) on the World Wide Web makes them another common feature of the virtual landscape.

Memes are contagious patterns of 'cultural information' that get passed from mind to mind and directly generate and shape the mindsets and significant forms of behavior and actions of a social group. Memes include such things as popular tunes, catchphrases, clothing fashions, architectural styles, ways of doing things, icons, jingles and the like.

(Knobel and Lankshear, 2007: 199)

As Deumert notes, the spread of material 'via personal networks is not new', but 'what is new is the speed and scale with which this happens' (2014: 87). Memes are a good example of this. In the online context, "meme" is a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language "move", or some other unit of cultural "stuff" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007: 202). Memes are a striking example of extensive, bottom-up activity that changes the linguistic

Memes are a new kind of text production and consumption: they point to another kind of 'literacy' (see Section 4.1) that is needed to both produce and understand memes (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007: 203). What these skills are can be examined by looking at the 'doge' meme. The meme consists of a picture of a shiba inu dog accompanied by a series of words and short phrases. The words are in Comic Sans font and in bright, fluorescent colours. Anyone producing a doge meme would follow these formatting conventions. The construction of the phrases in the meme follows the pattern intensifier +adjective/noun. Intensifiers are usually words like 'so', 'very', 'much' and 'many'. This pattern is found in various examples of the meme and for those who are literate in the conventions of this meme, the phrases are immediately recognisable as doge phrases (McCulloch, 2014).

What makes doge phrases distinctive is that they don't obey the normal conventions of combination (McCulloch, 2014). Intensifiers normally used with nouns are used with adjectives and vice versa; thus we find 'much happy' and 'very word'. While the doge meme is clearly an internet phenomenon, it has not stayed within these virtual walls. Image 5.13 is a photo taken in a university library.

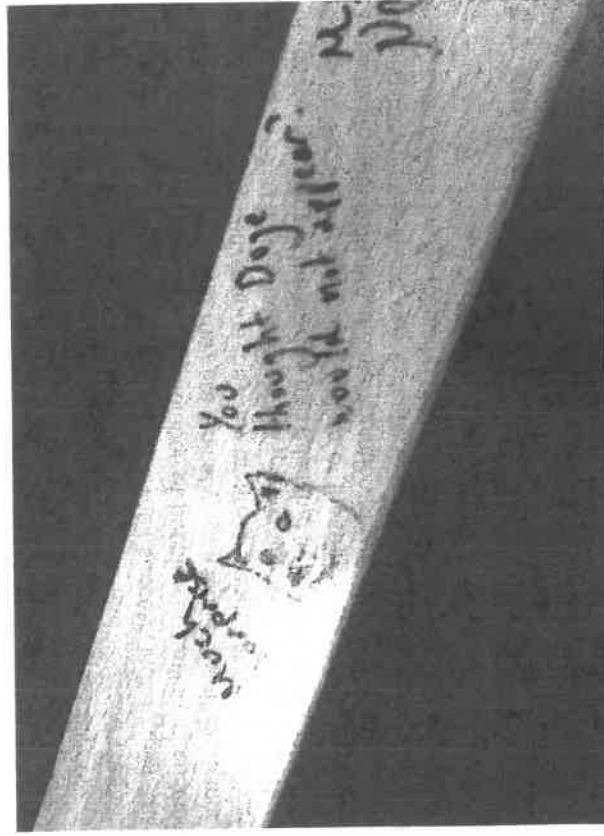


Image 5.13 Doge graffiti

Image 5.13 includes a doge phrase, 'much surprise' and a picture of a dog. Written beside it, 'You thought Doge would not appear?' makes clear the move from appearing in virtual space to a table in a library. While we certainly don't want to condone drawing on library furniture, this transgressive use of language suggests that the conventions of doge are not only well established but also well-travelled.

Knobel and Lankshear argue that 'replicability' is important to consider for online memes (2007: 208). This means they should be easy to copy. They should also have the feature of 'fecundity', which refers to the 'rate at which an idea or pattern is copied and spread' (2007: 202). Research on successful memes, that is, those which are picked up and reported on by mainstream media, suggests that memes should be humorous (though they may contain an element of satire or social commentary), be richly **inter-textual** (referring to other texts, cultural products or practices see Section 3.5.5) and contain some kind of 'anomalous juxtaposition', that is, the placement of two mismatching or incongruous elements together (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007).

Memes can be used for other purposes too. Varis and Blommaert (2015) argue that while memes may not appear to communicate a 'real' message, they have an important function. They are a form of **phatic** communication. Phatic communication draws attention to the act of communicating for its own sake. Engaging in ritual greetings, small talk and discussion of the weather are all examples of phatic communication. The creation and sharing of memes is also a way to construct and communicate identity. We share memes with people we like and who we think will like and appreciate the meme. This does send a message. It communicates something like 'I like you, and we are like each other'. The creation, sharing and liking of memes is, as Varis and Blommaert argue, an important way of being social.

What is striking about memes is the linguistic and semiotic creativity involved in their creation and consumption. Their success, indeed their existence as memes, depends on a number of people consuming, circulating and building on the meme. They are indicative of a kind of semiotic democracy because the conventions they rely on are generated from the bottom-up and shared by a large number of people. Memes rely on a particular kind of literacy, a fluency in the **codes** and rules that inform the meme (see Section 4.1). Because of the online nature of these memes, they also require some facility with software, the manipulation of text, image and sound. Consuming the memes helps one to learn these rules and thus replicate and reproduce the meme by following the rules established by a collective.

## 5.7 SUMMARY

Understanding the linguistic landscape is important for understanding the spaces in which we live. While many of the signs we encounter on a typical day seem normal and inconsequential, they nevertheless communicate messages and convey ideological information that we tacitly consume. While some signs are clearly the preserve of the powerful, there are spaces in the linguistic landscape where other voices can be seen. These spaces may be understood as contested, but they show that space and place are more varied than we normally think. Examining signs, both in the 'real world' linguistic landscape and the virtual landscapes of the World Wide Web, allows us to learn more about meaning and understand the contributions of

others. The increasing access to technology has made individual agency more visible. But we find these voices only if we know how to look. The tools described in previous chapters, together with those introduced here, allow us to examine the world in which we live in new ways.

## FURTHER READING

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## NOTE


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# Language, Society and Power

An Introduction

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