

Reinventing the linguistic landscape of a national protest

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The relatively new field of linguistic landscapes takes as its goal the investigation of language in place and space. Drawing on previous notable linguistic landscape theories, I look to uncover how abstract space can become reappropriated and reinvented to create visibility for a suppressed minority. More specifically, I examine how the ever-shifting landscape of a mass protest can use a “landscape of dissent” to change erasure into visibility. This project focuses on documenting the linguistic landscape of the National Immigration Reform March that took place in the National Mall of Washington, DC on March 21, 2010. Over 200,000 people attended this protest, with thousands of images and signs coming and going, constantly reinventing the landscape over the course of the day. To conduct a qualitative multimodal analysis, I collected data focusing on written words, images, spoken words, and the mix of all of these within projected video. The data include over 200 photographs and five videos taken over the course of four hours. By focusing specifically on 32 photographs and three videos that best represent each aspect of the landscape, I uncover how individual and group identities are created and constantly shifting, while at the same time interacting with and supporting each other. I conclude by showing how an image of solidarity emerges by reinventing the landscape to transform erasure into visibility and power.

1 Introduction

The field of linguistic landscapes is a fairly new subfield of linguistics, though quickly growing, investigating the meaning and purpose of language in place and space. Previously, researchers of linguistic landscapes have primarily relied on quantitative sampling, defining a space and counting the instances of language use within that space to understand how language is being socially or politically used. The purpose of this paper is to take the investigative methods for the linguistic landscape, which include a mixture of linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, and sociology, and to apply them in a qualitative way that would work for investigating the ever-shifting landscape of a mass-scale protest. In

choosing to analyze the landscape of a protest, I am most interested in examining how this “landscape of dissent” is able to change erasure into visibility. Erasure here draws from Coupland and Jaworski’s definition, “where specific sociolinguistic evidence is rendered invisible in the drive to keep stereotyped generalizations intact,” (2004: 37). In this paper, I am interested in how a community that is erased in the public sphere is able to so drastically alter the landscape through a protest that they create visibility.

1.1 The Setting

Protests can inherently be mammoth, especially when they target current issues in the national or international context. Washington, DC provides the perfect arena for investigating such a protest, as people travel from around the country to take part in a large movement centered in the nation’s capital. As such, I decided to focus this project on documenting the linguistic landscape of the National Immigration Reform March that took place in the National Mall on March 21, 2010. The National Mall is located in the very center of Washington, DC and is a large expanse of grass running from the Capitol building to the Washington Monument, slightly over one mile in length. During the National Immigration Reform March, over two hundred thousand people attended this protest, filling the entire expanse of the National Mall. The presence of the protesters was mammoth, with thousands of images and signs constantly reinventing the landscape over the course of the day. Due to the constant shifting and fleeting elements of the landscape, I am examining *moments* in time of the protest to find a general qualitative overview of what the landscape of a protest looks like over the course of time, similar to the methodology applied by Pavlenko (2010) in her investigation into the historical landscape of Kyiv.

2 Theoretical Background

In order to answer the question, “How is a landscape of dissent constructed over the course of a protest, and what does it look like?” I draw from multiple social and sociolinguistic theories. Leeman and Modan discuss how the visibility of languages can be, and often are, controlled by a governing body, leading to a “sanitized” linguistic landscape (2010: 187). Therefore, I first establish that the landscape of a protest is unique as a site where a community that is essentially erased and “sanitized” by the majority becomes visible through their dissent as a community of practice. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) define a community of practice as “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations—in short, practices—emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor,” (464). In the case of a protest, the mutual endeavor is to create

visibility for the contested issue; in this case it is national immigration reform. In becoming a community of practice, albeit a temporary one, the group establishes temporary norms for speaking and representing themselves and their voices. This can be analyzed visually through linguistic landscapes.

To further theoretically ground the multiple elements of a protest, I look first to Lefebvre's concept of "abstract space" (1991). With this theory, Lefebvre explains how abstract space is always changing and reflective of the social, which is exactly the essence of a protest. The particular social aspect that this protest is reflecting is the current contestation over United States immigration policy. Thus, the landscape of the protest is responding to this current issue. Further grounding individual aspects of a protest, Halliday (1978) explains that signs tell us something about the world and position us in relation to someone or something in it. Therefore, the signs present at a national immigration reform protest, including any written or printed words or images meant for public display, tell people about this issue, the effects that the current immigration policy has on groups of people, and ask people to then position themselves either in alignment or disalignment with the protesting group. The reaction that is elicited from people is part of Scollon and Scollon's "discourse of place" (2003). As they explain, within a "discourse of place", space is transformed by signs, and people react to this transformation. When this occurs, the abstract space becomes reappropriated and reinvented in a way that creates visibility, which is part of what makes a national protest such a striking linguistic landscape.

In addition to the reappropriation of space, I am analyzing how images other than signs influence the linguistic landscape and what type of symbolic capital each image draws upon. Barthes (1968) emphasizes that every image in society becomes a sign, even clothing. Thus, I include in my analysis clothing with words, clothing without words, flags, and video projected during the protest. Each contributes to the linguistic landscape in a meaningful way, whether through invoking a particular group through an image or by engaging the surrounding people in a dialogue of sorts. Each of these also draws on a particular type of symbolic capital: embodied or institutional (Bourdieu, 1986). While embodied capital is achieved through personal narratives and experiences, institutional capital is achieved through reference to institutions and by engaging with them.

Finally, the presence of defined groups within a protest is intriguing because of the repetition of image they create, especially if they are wearing matching clothing or carrying matching signs. Tannen (2007) explains that in discourse, "repetition is evaluative: It contributes to the point. Here falls the function of repetition which is commonly referred to as emphasis" (60). Furthermore, in formal semantics research, Lengye (1988) found that repetition in the form of semantic couplets leads to cohesion in the discourse. If we extend Lengye's findings to visual discourse, and if we allow for repetition in the

language of a linguistic landscape, it can be argued that each group is creating an emphasis of their own message. Even more important, each of these smaller messages becomes cohesive and is reflective of the metamessage of the protest, the “social and emotional messages behind the literal content of talk,” (Schilling, in press: 12). As a result, the metamessage is strengthened with each instance of repetition. This then reinforces the community of practice’s goal of creating a landscape of dissent and leaves the observer with a lasting impression of the overlying metamessage.

3 Methodology

In applying these concepts to this project, I collected multimodal data of the linguistic landscape, focusing on written words (signs, shirts, etc.), images (signs, colors, presence of groups, and non-verbal representational clothing), spoken words (the languages used and “dialogue” format of projected live video), and looking at how the projected video at the protest includes all of these. The original data includes over 200 photographs and five videos over the course of four hours. It is important to note that the data collected is only that which was sampleable by myself. Thus, this does not include every chant, individual conversations between protesters, every sign, and so forth. The data which I collected, however, do include general photographs of the landscape masses, individual photographs of particular elements of the landscape, and individual videos of projected videos and chants. I collected these as a participant observer and by constantly walking around and through the protest, continuously taking photographs, in an attempt to capture what people were experiencing in different areas and at different times of the protest. At this stage of the research, there were no direct criteria for what was documented, as I was attempting to document as wide a visual sample as possible.

I then categorized the photographs into topics using a grounded theory approach¹ and indexed each photograph with the topics that they represent. I chose to focus on 32 photographs and three videos that best represented each area of focus. My final analysis is a qualitative overview attempting to capture the shifting nature of the protest and takes into account the languages present, purpose of the images, and languages used for addressing the audience in the videos. The analysis also examines how the specific languages used were able to create alignment with the protesting group and distancing from the general public, as well as how individual and group identities are created and constantly shifting in the linguistic landscape.

¹ The grounded theory approach is widely used in qualitative Applied Linguistics research and operates such that theories arise from the data. Data is collected, then coded, then grouped by similarity into modules, and theories arise from analysis of the modules.

4 Data and Analysis²

4.1 Photographs

4.1.1 Reappropriation of Space

Selected photographs from the protest are included below. These pictures show how space was reinvented and reappropriated. In the first photograph in Example 1, the National Mall is shown filling completely with a sea of people, changing an open expanse of grass into one of the nation's largest congregations of people, therein redefining the landscape. Additionally, Example 1 shows the top of mobile restrooms becoming standing room for active protesters (despite the patrol officers attempting to prohibit this use of the space), therein giving the landscape of the protest multiple visual levels not previously present. This was also achieved through the use of flatbed trucks filled with people in the streets, blocking the view of the Capitol building from the Mall (not pictured).

(1) Reappropriated spaces on the National Mall



² Permission was acquired from each photographed individual and group before photographs were taken



Through the use of multiple methods of reappropriation, the space became something new available for redefinition by the protestors, thus giving them a beginning element of visualization and power.

4.1.2 *Groups as a Repetition of Image*

Groups were also present in the form of political groups, regional groups, religious groups, ethnic groups, and so forth, representing a wide array of people and creating a repetition of image. Each individual group, such as that pictured below in Example 2, have their own individual message in their own words to convey to attendees. This is repeated through matching shirts and signs within the group, emphasizing their message.

(2) One of the groups creating a visual repetition of image



With hundreds of groups present, it is not possible to remember each individual message, but each of these messages is a unique voice being given to the overarching metamessage of immigration reform. As such, repetition at the small group level and larger protesting group level creates an incredibly strong emphasis on the overarching message for immigration reform in the United States that resonates long after the groups are gone.

4.1.3 *Clothing as Capital*

Clothing, verbal and non-verbal was also present in mass quantities. The photograph of the man with “Please listen” handwritten on his shirt in Example 3 shows the power of projecting embodied capital through clothing that is simultaneously functioning as a sign and how the language of this sign engages with the public, especially when one takes into account the fact that his shirt is in English, yet he did not speak any English.³

- (3) A powerful representation of embodied symbolic capital through clothing



This powerful image thus uses clothing as a means of embodied capital to interact with the English speaking general public and get them to emotionally and mentally respond. Additional non-verbal clothing present at the protest, such as a man dressed as an indigenous native, a man dressed as a mariachi, and the priest in full uniform come to represent entire groups of people and an understanding of the cultures being represented through those images, thus bringing these groups to the attention of a majority who may not have otherwise thought of them.

³ I learned this when I asked to take his photograph. When I switched to Spanish to ask for his permission, he also expressed to me his passion for the protest and his hope to relay his feelings to the wider English-speaking audience.

4.1.4 Additional Minority Language Presence

Additionally, the presence of minority languages on signs allowed for the representation of many people, all coming together to form one community of practice with the same message. The two most represented languages were English and Spanish, which also reflects the languages of the United States. However, some of the other languages that make up the languages of the United States were also present at the protest, including but that limited to Polish, Russian, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Italian, and Irish Gaelic.

(4) Sign in Korean reading “We are also America”



The photograph of the Korean sign in Example 4 is translated as “We are also America,” showing the same message of immigration reform and inclusion, this time interacting with a smaller minority group of people but for the same purpose.

4.1.5 Flags

As minority languages were present next to the majority language of English, so was there a side-by-side representation of minority flags next to the United States flag.

- (5) Side-by-side flags from different countries

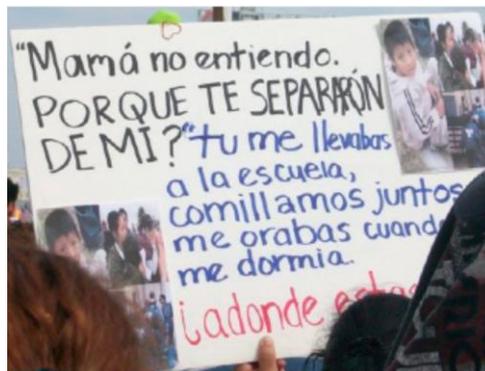


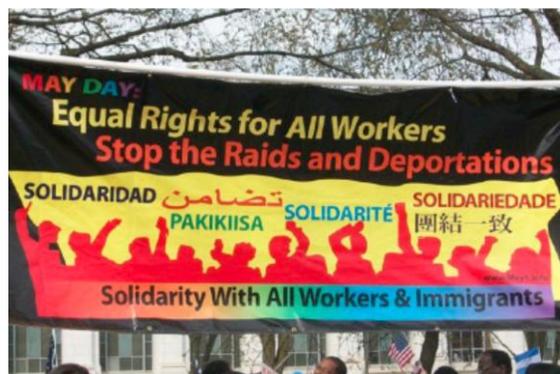
As shown in Example 5, this created a dual-identifying community of practice, one whose message is that they can be both American and citizens of a shared world. Additionally, flags were worn as clothing by protestors, therein coming to represent and identify them completely by their projected dual national identity.

4.1.6 Signs

Additionally, the signs in all different languages access both embodied and institutional symbolic capital. Some signs are handwritten telling personal stories and are thus embodied, such as that shown first in Example 6. Some are printed by companies with general slogans and are institutional, also shown in Example 6. And some are handwritten statements addressing institutional authorities (e.g. “Mr. Obama”) and thus make use of both.

- (6) Signs representing embodied and institutional symbolic capital



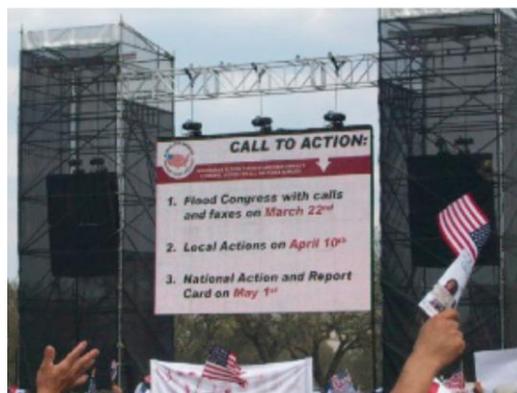


All of these signs in one space create a powerful mixing of embodied and institutional symbolic capital together to share stories and start conversations at all social levels.

4.2 Videos

Videos interact with all of these above elements. The projected live videos included statements read by officials, visual images of maps showing where protesting groups were from, and live interviews with people at the protest. At times, one speaker would speak Spanish and then another speaker would say something completely different in English, not translating each other and therein addressing different groups within the community of practice. At times, two speakers would talk, one in Spanish and one in English, translating each other, and thus reinforcing the dual identity presented in the landscape. A still image from one of the videos, represented to the left in Example 7, shows the call and response format that took part in some of the video, engaging the audience in a dialogue on a mass scale and receiving a strong positive response. It is interesting to note how these uses of projected live video on multiple screens to support the linguistic landscape differed greatly from the video shown near the end of the protest that was prerecorded by President Obama, also shown in Example 7. This video only used English, spoke directly to the audience without engaging them in dialogue, and used only the image of his face and shoulders in front of the American flag in the institutional setting of his office. This particular video received a much different reaction from the protestors, with much silence and some negative reactions.

(7) Contrastive videos on the National Mall



Note also the difference in celebratory raised hands and signs between the two videos. This contrast further emphasized the embodied and institutional symbolic power that the protesting group made use of to create their call for reform through a landscape of dissent.

4.3 Complex Multimodality

Of course, the various elements that make up the linguistic landscape do not occur in isolation. During a mass-scale protest, they all occur at once, making for an incredibly complex multimodal presence. As shown in Example 8, the complex multimodality comes together when all flags, groups, signs, videos, and so forth integrate to create a presence much stronger than any one would be able to do alone.

(8) The complex multimodality making of the linguistic landscape



It is through this complexity that the minority is empowered and erasure changes to visibility.

5 Conclusion

In summary, I found that the linguistic landscape of a protest includes many different modalities that are constantly interacting with and supporting each other. At the immigration reform march, the most prominent languages were English and Spanish, though others were present, representing many of the people currently in the United States. The variety of language presence and duality of presented identity are reflected through side-by-side visual representation of the United States flag with flags from other countries. Additionally, signs throughout the landscape create an image of solidarity within the protesting group and create a distancing from the government, president, and institutions of power. The presence of individual groups within the mass group creates a repetition of image and message. Also, the reappropriation of space on multiple levels strengthens visual presence and symbolic power. Through all of these, the landscape of dissent transforms erasure into visibility and power.

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