Linguistic Landscape of Dissent in Washington, DC

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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 a voice 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. That is, I am interested in how a community that is erased and silenced 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 (2010) discuss how the visibility of languages can be, and often are, 
controlled by a governing body, leading to a “sanitized” linguistic landscape. 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 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 to 
create 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”
Furthermore, in formal semantics research, Lengye (1988) found that repetition leads to cohesion. Thus, if repetition is applied to 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, therein strengthening the metamessage with each instance of repetition. This then strengthens 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 nonverbal 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. These include general photographs of the landscape masses and individual photographs of particular elements of the landscape. I collected these 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.

I then categorized the photographs into topics using a grounded theory approach and indexed each photograph with the topics that they represent. I then 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.

4 Data and Analysis

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 the protesters, giving the landscape 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). 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.

(1) Reappropriated spaces on the National Mall

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

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

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. 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 giving a voice to the socially silenced.

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

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, 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. 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) Sign in Korean reading “We are also America”

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. 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.

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

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. 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.

(6) Signs representing embodied and institutional symbolic capital

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. 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 visibility through a landscape of dissent.

(7) Contrastive videos on the National Mall

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 voice and presence much stronger than any one would be able to do alone. It is through this complexity that power is claimed by the silenced and erasure changes to visibility.

(8) The complex multimodality making of the linguistic landscape
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 many others were present, reflecting the actual composition of 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.

At this time, immigration reform has still not been passed in the United States. Though the impact of the National Immigration March was strong, the United States Congress soon after found itself busy instead with issues of healthcare reform. However, while the governing bodies may not be currently discussing immigration reform, the people continue to. This protest had a strong effect on the citizens and has continued to be talked about, therein giving a lasting voice to the silenced. While that voice may be quiet at present, it is still there and ready to speak up again.

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References


