

SIGNS: Uncovering the mechanisms by which messages in the linguistic landscape influence language/race ideologies and educational opportunities

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Worldwide there is an increasing interest in environmental print or the linguistic landscape as a site of language and literacy learning. Paying attention to the language of street signs, billboards, storefronts, windows, etc. provides for meaningful and motivating ways for students to reflect upon, contrast, and explore different meanings constructed in their surroundings (Malinowski, 2015). Discussions in the classroom regarding why and where English and other foreign languages are used in the Colombian linguistic landscape, can serve as critical language awareness activities regarding conceived, perceived, and lived spaces (Lefebvre, 1991) and the resulting language ideologies of status that might emerge from analyzing the use of these languages in and around schools (Brown, 2012). However, I caution educators that the mere observation and documentation of signs in our surroundings, without adequately considering historical and often hidden meanings, may act to reinforce societal-dominant, first level interpretations of signs and may contribute to the strengthening of stereotypes that continue to position some with subaltern identities and limited educational opportunities.

The words “subliminal” and “unconscious” are commonly used to describe the influence of our linguistic landscape (LL) on language ideologies and subsequent pedagogical decisions in schools. However, exactly *how* these messages wield such subliminal power has gone relatively unexplored. In this presentation, I introduce the Semiotic Index of Gains in Nature and Society (SIGNS) (Przymus & Kohler, forthcoming; See Appendix), a new framework for LL analysis that investigates 1) diachronic and synchronic perspectives of place, 2) messages on syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, 3) elective vs. circumstantial reverse indexicality, 4) societal myths (Barthes, 1972), and 5) messages as metonyms and metaphors.

In directing our attention to the influence of our LL on our ideologies we greater understand how so much of what is in our linguistic landscape comprises our metalinguistic processing of our daily experiences. Previous LL studies have shown how to implement environmental print into the classroom as critical language awareness activities. “Critical LA (CLA) activities might help students recognize the different values attributed to languages and language speakers, interrogate stereotypic representations of languages, language speakers, and language learning, question social inequalities, and work towards greater equity” (Dagenais, et al., p. 140; see also Fairclough, 1992). With a comprehensive analysis of the LL using the SIGNS framework, students can gain increased insights into motivational and meaningful language study, and begin to understand the role of our linguistic landscape on language ideologies and their resulting impact on life opportunities.

Appendix: Semiotic Index of Gains in Nature & Society (SIGNS) Framework

