

## Bringing the 'Outside' 'Inside': Harnessing Linguistic Landscape in the French Class

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### **Abstract**

This article describes an exploratory study based on the linguistic landscape (LL) of Mumbai and how the same can be useful within a foreign language classroom at the postgraduate level. The multilingual nature of Mumbai is juxtaposed with the foreign language classroom through the linguistic landscape as a resource. Findings reveal that the linguistic landscape has the potential to inform foreign language pedagogy and develop learner motivation. Key concepts relating to foreign language acquisition and foreign language pedagogy emerge using LL in class. It also helps put learning in context by connecting with the learners' lived reality in terms of space, time and language. The article discusses the study's limitations and concludes with further avenues for teacher education and learning using a linguistic landscape.

**Keywords:** Linguistic landscape, foreign language, pedagogy, Mumbai, French

### **Introduction**

Linguistic landscape (LL) is a relatively recent area of inquiry, gaining ground in research and becoming a compelling study terrain. Multidisciplinary by nature, LL invites research from varied domains such as sociology, archaeology, anthropology, education and, since recently, language studies. LL allows diversifies resources and converts freely available material into rich learning content. This article attempts to answer the question of how LL can be used in French language classrooms.

## **What is Linguistic Landscaping?**

The term 'linguistic landscape' has been used in various ways. A common understanding is about the linguistic scenario in a geographical area. In this article, a linguistic landscape refers to signages and visual signs. LL, in this perspective, came into the foreground with the definition of Landry and Bourhis (1997) as "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration" (p. 25).

Highlighting the dynamic and multidimensional nature of LL, Pennycook (2010, p. 14) refers to it as a "fluid, urban semiotic space". Jaworski and Thurlow (2011, p. 2) say, "all landscape is semiotic". Even non-linguistic semiotic elements contribute to understanding LL in a symbiotic sense, such as graffiti (Pennycook, 2008), sounds, smells, and colours (Shohamy & Waksman, 2009). LL serves as an identity marker, the "social positioning of people who identify with particular languages" (Dagenais et al., 2009, p. 254).

Research on LL is eclectic, extending from educational settings in different geographies (See Brown on Estonia, 2012; Dagenais et al., 2009; Huebner on Thailand, 2009; Rowland on Japan, 2013; and Sayer on Mexico, 2010; to Gilbert's social and symbolic construction of space and, identity, 2008). Shohamy (2019) points out that interest in LL within sociolinguistics and applied linguistics gained momentum from 2006 onwards with research on diverse themes like language awareness (Gorter et al., 2021) and world Englishes (Bolton, 2012). However, LL remains underexplored in India, especially in foreign language studies.

## **Linguistic Topography of Mumbai**

In cosmopolitan Mumbai, English coexists alongside Marathi, Hindi and other languages. Its varied communitarian pockets like the Parsi colonies, Ulhasnagar, the Sindhi citadel, Matunga, the once Tamil empire, the Gujarati-dominated suburbs of Borivali/Kandivili, Dadar/ Girgaum for the 'old Marathi flavour', foster its cultural and linguistic heritage. A unifying force would be the 'Bambayya Hindi', a pidgin created by and for Mumbaikars.

## Methodology

The methodology outlines the process of using LL as a pedagogy in a French language classroom.

## Participants and Data Collection

The study was conducted within a Master's programme in French at the University of Mumbai for two years (2017-19). Ten learners attending a weekly class on Didactics of language and culture over one semester participated in the study. The methodology consisted of a four-level activity using LL as spelt out below:

- Focus group discussions.
- Engagement with LL photographs provided by the teacher
- Collection of LL instances
- Reflections on LL as a pedagogy

The study used a qualitative paradigm, facilitating contextualization of analysis (Barni & Bagna, 2015) of LL through what was perceived, communicated, and represented—in other words, the “experiential dimension” (Malinowski, 2015, p. 98).

## Focus Group Discussions

A set of eight varied signages from different areas of Mumbai was shared with the class. Four crucial questions were a vector for discussions.

- What do you think of the language used on the city/campus signboards?
- Would you like to share anything in particular about signboards?
- What are the interesting features of signs around you?
- Have you heard of the concept of a linguistic landscape?

While learners noticed language variety on the boards, there were no remarks on textual or other inferences. However, there was enthusiastic discussion on the compulsory use of Marathi on shop boards under the insistence of a regional. The participants voiced their opinions like—*Why impose Marathi on the shop boards?, and you cannot achieve anything forcibly.*

The discussions brought out three vital elements. First is recognizing Mumbai's signage overcrowding; second, signages are bilingual or monolingual; and third, politics influences language choice.

### Engagement with LL Photographs Provided by the Teacher

Eight photographs of LL were shared with learners to initiate discussion on LL. Each group (of three students each) analysed the eight pictures and noted their ideas.

**Image 1**

*Sugarcane Juice Shop*



**Image 2**

*Neera*



**Image 3**

*Petrol Pump*



The above three images initiated much discussion. Learners opined that the shop owner (Image 1), probably from the North, pronounced 'fresh' as 'fress'. A similar transcription from English to Marathi was noted in Image 2 as well as the 'fill and chill' of Image 3. Students connected the Hindi-English/Hinglish language mixing to mixing in everyday speech. Some examples they gave were 'She's very kanjoos' (miserly), 'this style is very hat-ke' (different from the norm). All learners mentioned that the earlier generation spoke 'correctly' in whichever language they used.

Image 4 (below) was an instant favourite. All students recognized this gender-specific board. These stand-alone minivans with self-claimed herbal medicine specialists are an unmistakable fixture in Mumbai, triggering discussions on migrants and quacks. The two boards of Image 4 were a study of contrast. Learners argued that the English board (replete with errors) was

**Image 4**

*Himalaya Ayurvedic*



unnecessary for a predominantly Hindi-speaking clientele. The Hindi board had many English words transcribed into Hindi like ‘night’, ‘diabetes’, ‘acidity’, and ‘checking fees’. Learners observed interestingly that the liberal use of English words in Hindi and Marathi made it appear as if the original vocabulary was non-existent. Some examples were /Mala petrol fill karaicha aahe/, (I need to fill petrol)/phone madhe balance naahi/ (No balance in my phone).

**Image 5**  
*Toll Plaza*



**Image 6**  
*Metro Work*



Images 5 and 6 were official bilingual boards with discussions revealing their lack of uniformity and sometimes even clarity on government signages. For example, transport rules sign boards vary from place to place, with translations into Marathi for select phrases only, which could lead to confusion.

**Image 7**  
*College Nameplate*



**Image 8**  
*Back of a Truck*



Image 7 is a college’s official board in Gujarati, revealing the institution’s community affiliation. Image 8 has a distinct personal touch, displaying the truck owner’s name and faith in his identity.

### Collection of LL Instances

In this phase, learners had to gather pictures of visual signs in their neighbourhood and note down specificities. Though learners acknowledged the heterogeneous linguistic presence on the boards, the group's consensus was that English was the city's dominating language.

Shop names with a French touch were mentioned, such as /Lé Salon/, /L'Enchanté/, and /Le Désire/. Though the French were erroneous, this tendency was interpreted as a desire to appropriate the language of chic. Comments like—*It is fashionable to have names that sound French, they just add an accent here and there, and French is stylish, substantiate this view.*

One learner presented the popular toothpaste advertisement/*Kya aap Close Up karte hain?/ (Do you Close-Up?). This Hindi-English trend was attributed to a media upsurge. An example given was the wide use of the conjunction 'ki' to replace 'that' in an English sentence. This reflection-discussion on LL put the thrust on code-mixing and language varieties.*

The oral feedback obtained on the entire exercise was largely favourable. Remarks such as *we had never really paid attention to boards*", "*the city reveals a lot if we look for it, and we could connect this with what we learn in didactics* established LL as a valuable addition to foreign language pedagogy.

### Reflections on LL as a Pedagogy

#### *An Authentic Out-of-Class Resource*

Authentic resources enable the learner to connect with the real world (Richards, 2006). LL achieves this objective. It also motivated reticent learners to participate. Foreign language teaching usually relies on ready-made resources, but in this case, learner-teacher-sourced LL facilitated an outside-in approach. At no point were learners provided with a narrative. The reflective process helped co-construction of knowledge.

#### *Power Structures in Language*

Power hierarchy silently plays out in communication through LL (Landry & Bourhis, 1997), as does the 'dominance' (Malinowski, 2015) of one language over another. This resonated with the learners who spoke about mother tongues losing ground— *If you speak English at home, you are considered more elite, and So many people speak only English at home.* The

role of LL as a link between the target language and the local linguistic situation was underscored.

#### *Understanding Multilingual Competence and Literacies*

Though most learners speak many languages, there is a sense of inadequacy regarding the same. *I can speak Telugu but can't write or read, and I am not so good at Marathi* are some examples. A discussion on multilingual competence, as a total of known languages in varying degrees of mastery, was thus negotiated through LL by addressing commonly held conceptions and pointing out the importance of knowing languages, even if a high level of mastery in these languages was not attained. Equating language competence to perfection in languages in listening, speaking, reading and writing skills was a point of discussion toward a better understanding of multilingual competence. Commonly used phenomena such as code switching, code mixing enabled learners to draw parallels with the target language (different registers of the French language, foreign loan words in French, etc.)

#### *Language as a Humanizing Factor*

Another interesting fact emerged from Mumbai's invisible languages versus the visible LL. In linguistically specific localities such as Dharavi (Tamil) or Ulhasnagar (Sindhi), one can 'see' and hear these languages, which are otherwise relatively absent in the cityscape. These languages are much present in these linguistically and culturally defined pockets in regular conversations, billboards, obituary posters and so on but are not frequently heard otherwise in Mumbai, barring these specific areas. This opened a debate on language and identities. Thus, LL in language class represents what Malinowski (2015, p. 2, cited in Lefebvre, 1991) calls "lived space", or that which learners interpret through the prism of their experience. One other important element is humour on the streets of Mumbai! Overall, the discussions highlighted the humanizing element of language—language as embedded in everyday lives, including that of learners.

The points brought out by reflections are in line with previous research that the use of LL facilitates teaching beyond the classroom (Krompak et al., 2021), on language and power structures (Bolton, 2012); on language domination and LL (Bellés-Calvera, 2019; Blackwood, 2011), multilingual repertoire and multilingualism (Badrinathan, 2021; Leconte et al., 2018). This study's originality resides in its unique context, urban multilingual

Mumbai, juxtaposed with the foreign language classroom. A readily available yet powerful resource, LL should be promoted within teacher training initiatives to enhance the salience of this tool.

### **Limitations of the Study and Future Perspectives**

Though limited in terms of participants and time duration, this study has revealed LL's merits as a novel resource that encourages a learner-centric pedagogy.

While it is customary to outline areas for further research, LL justifies its case. It remains a relatively new tool to be explored on the periphery of foreign language teaching-learning. Moreover, appropriating local public spaces as classroom resources makes foreign language learning a 'real' phenomenon. This study is probably among India's pioneering original studies on LL and foreign languages. Nevertheless, a longitudinal study would help assess the long-term impact of LL as a classroom resource.

### **Conclusion**

This research started with a modest intention of exploring LL in foreign language learning. It concludes that the use of LL contributes to language enhancement and discussions at a conceptual and pragmatic level. What are the ideologies that underpin what is visibly seen? What does an image convey? Such questions can throw up both comfortable and uncomfortable answers pointing towards vital concepts related to didactics of language. LL proved to be a humanizing activity, serving as a connection between space, time, individual and society. More importantly, it opens the way for further research on LL as a pedagogical tool in the foreign language classroom.

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