Semiotic and spatial scope: Towards a materialist semiotics

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Introduction

We wish in this paper to join a project that, in our view, ties together much of Gunther Kress’ work, and can also be found, among others, in the ‘Geosemiotics’ developed by Scollon & Scollon (2003). This project is the construction of a genuinely materialist theory of signs: a study of signs that sees signs not as primarily mental and abstract phenomena reflected in ‘real’ moments of enactment, but sees signs as material forces subject to and reflective of conditions of production and patterns of distribution, and as constructive of social reality, as real social agents having real effects in social life. Kress consistently calls this a social semiotics (e.g. Kress 2009), but it is good to remember that methodologically, this social semiotics is a materialist approach to signs. Such a materialism reacts, of course, against the Saussurean paradigm, in which the sign was defined as “une entité psychique” with two faces: the signifier and the signified (Saussure 1960: 99). The study of signs – semiotics – could so become a study of abstract signs; retrieving their meaning could become a matter of digging into their deeper structures of meaning systems; and semiotics could become a highly formal enterprise (for an example, see Eco 1979).

Much of the problem resides in the way in which ‘system’ is imagined here. In classical structuralist approaches, a system is necessarily timeless and context-less – it is the deeper level that generates the ‘real’ phenomena operating in a concrete context, the ‘software’, so to speak, that allows an almost infinite number of applications. Systems, or ‘structures’, consequently display an uneasy relationship to history: the structuralist ‘synchrony’ was necessarily ‘achronic’ because it did not claim to have any empirical existence. After all, an empirical ‘synchrony’ in linguistics, for example, would come down to “the recording of all the words spoken at the same time by thousands of speaking subjects” – an enterprise which Greimas, for instance, qualifies as “rather pointless” (1990: 95), and
which from a structuralist viewpoint would also not be worth one’s while. ‘System’, however, can also be imagined as a historical given, as something that brings historical coherence (and hence, understandability) to isolated facts by means of patterns – cultural patterns such as e.g. ‘classicism’, historical ones such as e.g. ‘absolutism’, economic ones such as e.g. ‘capitalism’ and so on. Foucault’s work addressed and decoded such systems – regimes of power/knowledge – and much of Bourdieu’s work can be read as an analysis of the class system in France. Such patterns define systems, they are systemic, but they are not abstract. They have a real (‘synchronic’) existence in a plethora of individually insignificant but observable material features, and such features make sense when they are seen in their totality. This is the core methodological point in ethnography, and incidentally also the point Bourdieu always emphasized because it is what allows us to discover ‘the logic of practice’, (see e.g. Bourdieu 1990). It is such a historical, material, real system that we have in mind, and the way we approach such a system is by means of ethnography.

The angle from which we approach it is from questions of public space. More in particular, our point of departure is sociolinguistic-ethnographic research in areas marked by ‘super-diversity’, extreme forms of social, cultural, linguistic diversity emerging from post-Cold War migration movements into the urban centers of Western Europe (Vertovec 2006). We will draw on work done in London Chinatown (Huang 2010) and in a popular inner-city neighborhood in Antwerp, Belgium (Blommaert 2010). From empirical reflections on signs in public space – currently captured under the term ‘Linguistic Landscape’ studies – we will move to make a simple point, that signs rarely have a general meaning and mostly have a specific meaning. This simple empirical observation, however, draws semiotics into a different theoretical realm and propels us towards materialist and ethnographic approaches to signs. Before we get there, a few background remarks are in order.

**Signs in public**

Public signs both reflect and regulate the structure of the space in which they operate. Sociological, cultural, sociolinguistic and political features of that space will determine how signs look and work in that space, and signs will contribute to the organization and regulation of that space by defining addressees and selecting audiences and by imposing particular restrictions, offering invitations, articulating norms of conduct and so on to these selected audiences. Messages in the public space are never neutral, they always display connections to social structure, power and hierarchies. The reason for that is that public space itself is an area
(and instrument) of regulation and control, of surveillance and power. To go by Michel Foucault’s words, “spatial anchoring is an economic-political form that demands detailed study” (Foucault 2001 (1977): 195, see also Lefebvre 2000).\(^1\) The public space of a market square or a highway is, in contrast to the private space of e.g. one’s dining room, a shared space over which multiple people and groups will try to acquire authority and control, if not over the whole of the space, then at least over parts of it. It is an institutional object, regulated (and usually ‘owned’) by official authorities whose role will very often be clearest in the restrictions they impose on the use of space (prohibitions on smoking, loitering, littering, speed limits, warnings, and so on). Communication in the public space, consequently, is communication in a field of power; sociolinguistically, the question is “how does space organize regimes of language?” (Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck (2005:198); semiotically, we just have to replace ‘language’ by ‘signs’. The question assumes that regimes can be multiple and competing but that they nevertheless function as regimes, i.e. as patterns of normative conduct and expectations, authoritative patterns of conduct to which one should orient.

Two recent branches of scholarship have taken signs in public space as their object: first, Linguistic Landscape studies (henceforth LL, Landry & Bourhis 1997; Gorter 2006; Backhaus 2007), and second, Geosemiotics (henceforth GS), the particular approach developed by Scollon & Scollon (2003) to language in the material world. While LL has over the past years become part of the mainstream of sociolinguistics, GS has had remarkably less success and remains a somewhat idiosyncratic approach. Let us now zoom in on LL.

Studies on linguistic landscapes are mainly devoted to the public visibility of multilingual phenomena within bi/tri-lingual countries and cities such as Brussels, Belgium, or Montreal, Canada. An increasing amount of work focuses on highly globalised and internationalised cities such as Beijing (Pan Lin 2009) or Tokyo (Backhaus 2007). According to Backhaus (2007: 12), “the lack of a summarising term” could be the cause that in spite of precursors going back to the 1970s, LL has only become a topic in sociolinguistic studies in recent years. In these more recent formulations, “Linguistic Landscape is concerned with languages being used on signs (hence, languages in written form) in public space” (Gorter 2006: 11; cf also Landry & Bourhis 1997; Ben-Rafael et al. 2006; Barni & Extra 2008; Shohamy & Gorter 2009; see Juffermans 2010 for a survey and discussion). This formulation, of course, begs all sorts of substantial methodological questions, and underdeveloped

\(^1\) « L’ancrage spatial est une forme économico-politique qu’il faut étudier en detail ». 
methodologies continue to haunt LL.

In order to clarify that remark, we turn to one prominent example of LL, Backhaus’ (2007) study of Tokyo. Backhaus’ study is overwhelmingly quantitative: it lists the languages publicly observed in areas in Tokyo, juxtaposes them and ranks them on the basis of frequency and density of distribution. Backhaus (2007: 60) pointed out that LL cannot develop without a clear quantitative corpus, and he refers critically to Geosemiotics in this respect. Backhaus, however, fails to see the fundamental difference between GS and his LL: the fact that according to GS, a better comprehension of the socio-cultural meaning of language material requires ethnographic understanding rather than numbers, and that signs are necessarily addressed as multimodal objects rather than as linguistic ones. Backhaus’ study was focusing on numbers and on general linguistic description around the numbers – concretely, counting the languages we can identify on public signs. Now, signs can be a lot more interesting than that. Signs in social space tell us a lot about the users of the space, how users interacts with signs, how users influence and are influenced by them; they so start telling stories about the cultural, historical, political and social backgrounds of a certain space – the ‘system’ in the sense outlined earlier. Quantitative Linguistic Landscape studies, as the very first step, draw attention to the existence and presence of languages in a particular space and can answer questions such as ‘how many languages are used in space X’? But the argument does not cut very deep, and what we get is a rather superficial, ‘horizontal’ and distributional image of multilingualism. The fact that these languages are ingredients of multimodal signs, and that these signs occur in non-random ways in public space, is left aside, and this is where we need to begin our own search. We can draw on some crucial insights from the work of Kress and on some fundamental notions from GS to help us in our search, so let us look at some images.

**Scope and demarcation**

We will start with a (at first glance) hardly spectacular picture from London Chinatown
This is of course a mundane sign: a no-go sign at the entrance of a parking garage in London Chinatown. We see ‘text’ (the Chinese writing, saying ‘entrance prohibited’), as well as a conventionalized iconographic shape, the meaning of which is universally construed as ‘no entrance’. Text co-occurs here with the visual shape of the sign, and from this co-occurrence we can infer that one has to do with the other: the text supports, emphasises or repeats the information contained in the non-textual, visual sign, and vice versa. What will primarily interest us here is their co-occurrence and the way in which such co-occurrences actually function. Let us run through some issues that emerge at this point.

1. Even if words, colours and shapes co-occur and interact here, the different elements still appear to operate in different ways. Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996), as we know, defined such co-occurrences as multimodal signs and showed that the different ‘modalities’ (words versus shapes, colours etc) have different ‘affordances’. One can
do different things with different modalities, and constructing a multimodal sign often revolves around combining the affordances of the different modalities. Thus, while the visual shape of the sign is quite generally understood (the sign can be found all over the world, with the same meaning), the Chinese text underneath it is not understandable for all. People who do not know Chinese will not understand what the text says (even if the co-occurrence with the sign may offer plausible hypotheses about the meaning of the text). Thus, the different modalities appear to have a different *semiotic scope*: they both reach (and select) different audiences. While everyone is the addressee of the visual sign, not everyone is an addressee for the Chinese text.

2. The sign is also put in a specific location (the entrance to the parking lot), and its meaning is specific to that physical location (the ‘no-go’ message only applies to the parking lot). Scollon & Scollon (2003) provide the term ‘emplacement’ for this: signs are placed in a *specific* space, and their emplacement defines their effects. A non-smoking sign inside a pub means that smoking is prohibited *inside*, not *outside* the pub. When someone smokes inside the pub, s/he is violating a rule; when s/he smokes outside the pub, no such rule is valid there. Signs, consequently, not only have a semiotic scope (as in point 1 above), but also a *spatial scope*: they operate in particular, identified spaces, and define such spaces.

3. If we combine semiotic scope and spatial scope, we understand that one of the major functions of public signs is *demarcation*. Signs cut up a larger space into smaller ones, into micro-spaces where particular rules and codes operate in relation to specific audiences. As we saw in the example here, there can be overlap and conflict. In the ‘no entrance’ sign, we saw on the one hand an almost universal semiotic scope (that of the visual road sign) combined with a much narrower one, articulated through the Chinese writing. Both forms of demarcation co-operated with a third one, spatial scope, which restricted the effect of the sign to a particular micro-space (the entrance to the car park). But this is where we see that public signs are cultural as well as social (and even political) objects. The different modalities that enter into the signs and make it into its multimodal outcome need to be seen in these terms: as affordances that have a cultural, social and political dimension.

4. They also have a *historical* dimension. Space, as we have seen in the previous point, is very often a *normative* actor in sociolinguistic processes, and this is where history enters the picture (cf. Blommaert & Huang 2010). There are expectations – normative expectations – about relationships between signs and particular spaces. One expects
certain signs in certain places: shop signs and publicity billboards in a shopping street, for instance, or train timetables in a railway station. We don’t expect such timetables in a café or a restaurant. When signs are ‘in place’, so to speak, habitual interpretations of such signs can be made, because the signs fit almost ecologically into their spatial surroundings. When they are ‘out of place’, or ‘transgressive’ in the terminology of the Scollons (2003: 147), we need to perform additional interpretation work because a different kind of social signal has been given. In a shopping street, shop signs are in place, while graffiti is out of place. The former belong there, the latter doesn’t, and its presence raises questions of ownership of the place, of legitimate use of the place, of the presence of ‘deviant’ groups of users in that place, and so on. So we attach to particular places a whole array of objects, phenomena, activities, and we do that in a normative sense, that is: we do it in a way that shapes our expectations of ‘normalcy’ in such places. It is the connection between space and normativity that makes space historical, for the normative expectations we attach to spaces have their feet in the history of social and spatial arrangements in any society.

5. Closely connected to this is the notion of visual repertoire. We all perceive and interpret signs on the basis of skills and competences we have gathered in life. Such skills and competences are cultural and social, and they revolve around the capacity to decode and act on the explicit and implicit codes used and deployed in signs. They strongly depend, consequently, on one’s social position in a particular space. Someone belonging to the established diaspora in London Chinatown (with e.g. origins in Hong Kong) may be able to read most of the public signs that are visible there, since s/he can read (at least some forms of) Chinese script as well as Latin script. Someone entering Chinatown with an Eastern-European background, in contrast, and literacy competences restricted to Cyrillic alphabet, will not be able to make much sense of most of the signs there, with the exception perhaps of ‘universal’ aspects of signs such as the road sign in our example. The visual repertoires of both people are strongly different; they way in which they engage with and can operate in relation to signs is thus very different as well. In superdiverse spaces, such differences between visual repertoires account for much of what goes on in the way of understanding and misunderstanding.

Let us, with these remarks in mind, now turn to another image, taken from inner-city Antwerp
This handwritten sign is posted in the window of what used to be a florist shop. The shop ceased its activities a while ago, and no discernible activities were taking place in the premises until this sign appeared. The sign is written in a mixture of traditional and simplified Chinese script, and it announces: “apartment to let: first class furnishing, water and electricity included, 350 Yuan per month (followed by a phone number”).

If we take the points we raised earlier and apply them here, we can see the following. The spatial scope is relatively clear: this sign operates within the space of the former shop; we can assume that activities connected to the sign would also be connected to this particular place: either the apartment is in this building, or the ones who rent it out live there. The semiotic scope is rather clear too, even if certain questions arise here. Every sign tells a story about who produced it, and about who is selected to consume it. In that sense, every sign points backwards to its origins, and forward to its addressees. It is obvious that this sign selects ‘Chinese’ audiences and organizes an interaction between ‘Chinese’ interlocutors. The ones who rent out the apartment are in all likelihood ‘Chinese’ immigrants, and the people to whom they intend to let the apartment are ‘Chinese’ as well. The scare quotes around
‘Chinese’, however, suggest that this notion is far from simple here. We saw that the 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). The mixture suggest ‘incomplete’ or emergent competence in either scripts: either the author is familiar with traditional script but does his best to accommodate potential customers from the People’s Republic (the largest contingent of Chinese immigrants nowadays), or vice versa. (The fact that ‘Yuan’ are used as identifying currency, rather than ‘Euro’, may lend support to the former hypothesis). In any event, the mixed orthographic resources deployed in this sign suggest a heterogeneous, unstable and transient community of ‘Chinese’ in inner-city Antwerp. An attempt to describe the semiotic scope of this sign leads us, thus, into sociolinguistic aspects of signs, and from there to wider socio-political and historical developments often hardly visible to the casual observer, or even to people living in the neighborhood where this sign was placed.

The neighborhood is in fact predominantly Turkish and Belgian, both groups being the most visible (and audible) ones there. Since the late 1990s, however, it has witnessed an influx of transient groups of immigrants from Eastern Europe (notably Poland and Russia), the Balkans (notably Albania and Bulgaria), Asia (notably from Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and Africa (Nigeria, Congo). Chinese immigrants have been largely invisible in this neighborhood; there are two Chinese – or to be more precise, Cantonese – restaurants that have been there since long, no other Chinese shops (e.g. groceries) have recently been opened, Chinese people are not part of the regular ‘street-scape’ of the neighborhood, and the local schools do not count significant numbers of learners of Chinese origins. The handwritten sign in Figure 2 is, in actual fact, the first piece of handwritten Chinese text we ever observed in the public space of this neighborhood in many years. If we would adopt a quantitative Linguistic Landscape approach to it, it would not be a significant item. It is significant if we take our approach though. The sign demarcates a space: a very small space, just one flat. But by doing that, it adds one more claim to ownership and legitimate presence and belonging to the semiotic landscape of the neighborhood, because here is a Chinese actor interacting with potential other Chinese actors – here is, in other words, the suggestion, the possibility of an existing social network. This network, as we saw, is largely invisible when we deploy everyday forms of observation; it is also statistically insignificant; but the presence of this sign suggests a process of transition in which a hitherto invisible community enters the public space and communicates there. The public space is now theirs too, they are also recognizable in the superdiverse neighborhood where they live. The Chinese
interlocutors have carved out a small space for themselves, a place they own and have exclusive access to.

The insight that signs demarcate space allows us now to make a qualitative statement about the public space. Obviously, when we compare the two signs above, we see that ‘public’ means different things in both cases. The semiotic scope of the road sign is wider than that of the ‘apartment for rent’ sign, and is in that sense more public – it addresses more potential interlocutors and excludes less. Or at least: the visual sign has a very broad scope, while the Chinese text underneath has a much narrower scope and targets a much smaller potential audience. ‘Public’ space is therefore manifestly layered and segmented; that is: space is not just a horizontal, distributional given, but also a vertical, stratified one. It is never uniform because the signs in public space demarcate areas and audiences, some of which are vast while others are microscopic. Road signs, for instance, would typically have a vast scope; but note that even such ‘universal’ signs have restrictions in spatial and semiotic scope. A sign announcing a speed limit of 70km/hour normally has no relevance for pedestrians and, thus, does not select pedestrians as their addressees. A scribbled note posted on a door saying “John, I’ll be back in five minutes” would represent the other extreme of the scale: a very ‘private’ notice in public space addressing just one specific interlocutor and excluding all others.

Such different signs coexist in public space, and we must realize that they do very different things in that space. It is important to realize this, because when we encounter a forest of signs, such as in London Chinatown or in super-diverse inner-city Antwerp, we can then now understand that this abundance of signs does not reflect a chaotic, disordered pattern, but reflects a form of order which begs investigation. Even if signs criss-cross, overlap and contradict each other, this doesn’t mean that we are facing what may seem a random display of semiotic resources. We may be facing different interacting (and sometimes conflicting) social orders, as when different groups compete over rights of ownership of a place and contest or overwrite each other’s signs (a frequent feature of graffiti). We can also be facing historical layering of signs, where older signs have become amended or erased by newer ones. In any event, the wide variety of signs raises questions about social order, agency and social structure, because each of the signs will have a particular scope and operate within that scope. Within that scope, signs have a form of agency: they order, request, ask, demand or inform people within that spatial zone. Emplacement, the central notion of GS, makes space into an active, agentive force in social life.
We can also make another qualitative statement at this point. The demarcating effect of signs in public space also defines identities. When potential addressees are being selected by a sign – for example, the ‘apartment for rent’ sign – they become something: they become potential legitimate users of the demarcated space. ‘In this demarcated space, Chinese people will be legitimate users’ would be the categorizing message contained in the sign. Such categorizations of legitimate usage, naturally, are social and political categories; they fuel the dynamics of power in public space and they are core ingredients of social and political conflicts – as when the police act against groups of young immigrant men who congregate in empty shopping malls after closing time. The shopping mall is made for ‘shoppers’ between 8AM and 6PM; as long as one displays shopping behavior there and then, one is a legitimate user of that space. After 6PM, however, it can become a skaters’ paradise or a haven for homeless people looking for shelter for the night. Ownership and legitimate use of such spaces change during the course of the day, and conflicts often ensue from denials of or contests about such changes – as when the shopping mall management refuse to turn their space over to skaters and homeless people after 6PM, and send in the police to remove them from the grounds. The upshot of this, however, is that when we walk through a street, our identities can and do change every few steps – from someone who is included in a communication network to someone who is excluded from it and back; and through this, from someone who belongs to a particular network or community, to someone who doesn’t belong, and back. We do not consciously feel such immediate changes in identity because we do not choose them. The signs select them for us and pin them upon us; we may experience them, though, when suddenly we feel ‘out of place’ when entering a shop or a bar in which we are not members of the ‘normal’ community of users. It is when people stare at us upon entering, or when we find that the people in that space are amazed, scared, disturbed or irritated by our presence there, that we realize that space has done something to us. Many if not most real spaces operate on a ‘members only’ basis. And this, of course, is a systemic observation.

Conclusions

The central insight we have applied in this paper is, as said at the outset, fundamentally trivial. It is the fact that most signs have a specific meaning, not a general one. The meaning and effect of signs, in actual social life, is not unlimited or unrestricted; it is specific to the space in which they are emplaced and to the addressees they select. This trivial insight brings us into a different realm of analysis, though. We cannot be satisfied by stating that the road sign in
Figure 1 means ‘no entrance’ in general. It is a real sign, planted in a real space, and it has a function there: it makes the space into a social and political object, an object of control, surveillance, power. Why? Because it is not just a sign, an unspecified sign, but because it is this particular sign, a sign planted at the entrance of a parking garage in London Chinatown. A social, or a materialist, semiotics starts from this fact: that this is not just any sign, but a specific one, and that we can only understand it when we dissect the specifics of its appearance and function. This social or materialist semiotics, thus, adopts an ethnographic point of departure: that social and cultural phenomena are situated, and that to understand them means that we have to understand their situatedness. Other exercises are, to adopt Greimas’ words again, rather pointless.

Kress’ work consistently pushed this agenda, and the fundamental impact of his work is that he brought signs and the study of signs into another theoretical field of force than that of mainstream semiotics. He has taught us to look at signs not for themselves, but for what they teach us about the social processes in which they are embedded and in which they play a vital role. Signs-in-society, that would perhaps be the best description of the object of the semiotics he practices and to which we subscribe. Much of the potential for theoretical and methodological innovation that emerged from his foundational interventions remains poorly explored, though, and we do have some way to go before we can speak of a mature materialist semiotics. But the points of departure are clear, and Kress offered us a pretty good roadmap for this journey.

Bringing this general point back to the area from which we started here, Linguistic Landscape studies, it is overly clear that LL would benefit immensely from seeing signs in public space as multimodal signs situated in a concrete context. In addition, it is through concentrated attention to semiotization – concretely, attention to multimodal signs – that we can turn space into a genuinely ethnographic object, full of traces of human activity, interactions, relations and histories. A whole new story of social and historical analysis could begin from there.
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