

Observations of the Linguistic Landscape  
in Minority Language Settings

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少数言語地域における言語景観

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### 1. Introduction

The study of signs and symbols, and their use or interpretation, falls within the field of semiotics, and the study of signs can tell us a lot about a particular culture, language use in society, societal multilingualism, and the phenomenon of globalization, among others. Sardar and Van Loon (1999, p.10) summarize signs as having three basic characteristics - they have a concrete form, they refer to something other than the signs themselves, and they are recognizable as signs. The Oxford Dictionary of English (2003) defines it as “a notice on public display that gives information or instructions in a written or symbolic form.”

For the traveler, signs, whether they be in written or symbolic form, are vital for the smooth passage from place to place in unfamiliar surroundings. A written sign may tell us the name of the city we are about to enter; a sign combining writing and a symbol (such as an arrow) may tell us that we need to turn right to find the city center; and a sign with just a symbol (for example a male or female figure) may tell us which is the correct door to enter for the public conveniences in the city center.

Shohamy and Gorter (2009, p.1) make the important point that any sign is closely connected with people, because:

they are the ones producing it and who choose the ways to represent and display it in diverse spaces. People are the ones who hang the signs, display posters, design advertisements, write instructions and create websites. It is also people who read, attend, decipher and interpret these language displays, or at times, choose to overlook ignore or erase them.

This paper aims firstly to set out a brief explanation of the relatively new area of study within sociolinguistics that is linguistic landscaping (or the linguistic landscape) (LL). This is followed by the potential insights that can be gained from studying the LL and a brief overview of the research that has been conducted in LL. Then the paper looks at observations into the multilingual (or monolingual) nature of LL in areas where a so-called minority language exists alongside a more dominant language. The analysis of the small quantity of data from these locations does not pretend to be comprehensive. However, it provides an illustration of the varied nature of LL within minority language settings, and points to future areas of potential for more comprehensive study in the LL field.

## 2. What is the linguistic landscape?

Linguistic landscaping is a relatively new area of research within the field of sociolinguistics. Shohamy and Gorter (2009, p. 1) state that it “is the attention to language in the environment, words and images displayed and exposed in public spaces, that is the center of attention in this rapidly growing area referred to as *linguistic landscape* (LL).” However, as Backhaus (2007, p.9) points out, perhaps the most commonly quoted definition of the linguistic landscape is that of Landry and Bourhis who wrote:

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. (1997, p.25)

Shohamy, Ben-Rafael and Barni (2010, p.xiv) state that research into LLs “focuses on analyzing these items according to the languages utilized, their relative saliency, syntactic or semantic aspects.” The study, therefore, can fall very much within the sphere of sociolinguistics.

The terminology, in particular the term “linguistic landscape” is not without its dissenters. Spolsky (2009, p. 25) argues that while the term “linguistic landscape” is attractive, it is rather awkward, and suggests that “cityscape” may be preferable to “landscape”. Spolsky considers public signage as “evidence of the sociolinguistic ecology of a geographically determined multilingual (or rather, multiliterate) speech community, a neighborhood whose boundaries might be defined demographically.”

In spite of debate about appropriateness of terminology, the term “linguistic landscaping” appears to be prevalent and the research field is growing. LL revolves around the study of language in a speech community or neighborhood, yet it is not the study of the spoken language, but of language written down on signs for display.

## 3. What can we learn from the linguistic landscape?

Shohamy and Gorter (2009, p.1-2) set out a list of questions that can be addressed when studying the linguistic landscape. Included in these questions are the following:

- What is LL really?
- How are signs, and people, and languages connected?
- What role does LL play in policy-making and what effects does it have on *de facto* language practices?
- What kind of reality does LL create and shape?
- What motivates people to display language?
- How do people value LL?
- What messages are being delivered to passers-by?
- Which types of language(s) are being created in the public space?
- How different is the spoken/heard language than the “represented” variety?
- How do readers and passers-by interpret LL?
- What role should people take about the language displayed in public spaces?
- How can LL be interpreted within existing theories or perhaps create new ones of linguistic ecology, and space?
- What does the study of LL in its many perspectives add to our understanding of language, society

and people?

In short, just as the study of spoken language takes many varied forms and yields insights into many aspects of society, the study of the written word in signage can also help us to understand society, or as Spolsky has put it “the sociolinguistic ecology of a geographically determined ... multiliterate speech community.” Shohamy and Gorter (2009, p.1) urge scholars to conduct research in LL when they state, “Language in spaces and places is calling for the attention of researchers and scholars who attempt to study and interpret its meaning, messages, purposes and contexts.”

#### 4. A brief overview of research in the linguistic landscape field

In this paper, there is not enough space to give an extensive overview of the research into LL. However, the categorizations of three of the major books in the research field of LL are illuminating. In their edited book *Linguistic Landscape: Expanding the Scenery*, Shohamy and Gorter (2009) organized the papers into five sections. These were:

- theoretical perspectives
- methodological issues
- language policy issues
- identity and awareness
- extensions and the way forward

Shohamy and Gorter (2009, p.5) point out that scholars are attempting to relate LL to theoretical approaches that are multidisciplinary, including historical, sociological, economic, ecological and sociolinguistic approaches. For a relatively new field, the issue of finding a robust methodology is imperative and this is reflected in the number of works concerning methodological issues. One of the foremost fields of LL study is language policy and planning, and this area of study is closely connected with section 5 of this paper that looks at LL in minority language settings. A further area of LL research is the study of the connection between language and identity where LL language is “representing individual, collective and national identities” (p.7). Finally, a number of studies on LL look at the challenges for this research field and the possible directions in which research will take in the future.

In *Linguistic Landscape in the City*, Shohamy, Ben-Rafael and Barni (2010) also edited the contributions into five sections. These were:

- linguistic landscape multilingualisms
- top-down, power and reactions
- benefits of linguistic landscape
- perceptions of passers-by
- multiculturalism in linguistic landscape

Shohamy et al. (2010) point out that there is a range of differing multilingual practices that are represented through differing LL. Multilingual LL are considerably different from what is often thought of as the standard monolingualism occurring in some societies. A large focus of LL research is on power relations in society. LL studies often differentiate between public and private signage, noting the power relations and difference between top-down signs (produced by authorities) and bottom-up signs (produced by individuals). Research on economic and social benefits (or disadvantages) is also an important area of study within LL, as is the perceptions and attitudes of different groups of people who are the intended (or unintended) readers

of the signs.

Backhaus (2007, ch.4) provides a summary of LL research prior to the publication of his book *Linguistic Landscapes: A Comparative Study of Urban Multilingualism in Tokyo*. He believes that in the research to date, despite differences in geographical location, methodology and research perspective, the “main problems pertaining to language on signs ... can be captured in three questions” (p.54):

- Linguistic landscaping by whom?
- Linguistic landscaping for whom?
- Linguistic landscape *quo vadis*?

This is a neat way to encapsulate the LL field of study. As Backhaus (p.57) explains, these three questions “refer to the writers, the readers and the diachronic development of language in public space.”

## 5. A traveler's observations of the linguistic landscape in minority language settings

The main focus of this section is on two cities in Europe, Barcelona in Spain, and Edinburgh in Scotland. Many travelers to these destinations will assume that the languages on display will be Spanish (and some English) in Barcelona, and English only in Edinburgh. However, Barcelona has a proud history as part of Catalonia, in particular setting itself apart from the Spanish capital of Madrid. It has its own language, Catalan. How is the balance of languages reflected in the LL of the city? Edinburgh is the capital city of Scotland, a country that sees itself as different from England to its south. Scotland also has the minority language, Scots Gaelic, but to what extent is it reflected in the LL of the capital?

### 5.1 The linguistic landscape in Barcelona, Spain

Barcelona, located in north-east Spain, is one of the most famous cities in Europe. The city hosted the Olympic Games in 1992 and has world famous attractions that draw many visitors every year. Barcelona has a population of approximately 1.6 million with another 3.6 million “crammed into the province around the city” (Simonis, 2009, p. 181).

Barcelona is situated in Catalonia, and while many of the inhabitants of the city are proud Catalans who speak Catalan, Simonis (2009, p.181) points out that due to migration in the 1950s and 1960s approximately 1.5 million Spaniards from other parts of Spain moved into the city and its surrounding areas, and they often prefer to speak Spanish rather than Catalan. Strubell (2001, p. 269) points out the concern felt in Catalonia about the language attitudes of young people. Strubell points to the work of Larreula (1998, p.20) who writes that although the offspring of the immigrants from the 1950s and 1960s identify themselves as Catalans, they “perceive that most Catalans communicate naturally in Spanish.” According to Larreula, this means that some feel that the Catalan language is “artificially fostered by those in power.”

Drysdale (2001, p. 126), on the other hand, believes that “Catalan, a language that was almost wiped out under Franco, has bounced back with extraordinary vitality in Spain, to the point where immigrants from the rest of Spain now readily adopt Catalan as their first language.” Until General Franco's death in 1975, the Catalan language was banned in Spain, and everyone was forced to speak Castillian Spanish in the public domain. Drysdale (p.125) points to figures from the 1991 census that show 94% of Catalans understand Catalan, 68% speak it and read it, and 40% can write it.

To the visitor, then, what should be the expectations of the LL of Barcelona? What do the signs in Barcelona tell us about current language use in society in the city? Five photos of signs taken in the summer of 2010 in different locations (airport, metro, hotel, public bicycle rental, shop) give us an insight into

language life in the city.

Observations

(A) Barcelona Airport



Photo 1 : Sign at Barcelona El Prat Airport

As the photograph of the “departures” sign shows, three languages are represented in signs at the airport - Catalan (Sortides), English (Departures) and Spanish (Salidas). All three languages are written in the same size lettering, however, the Catalan and Spanish languages are represented in bold font, in white and yellow respectively. Importantly, in one sense it is the Catalan language that takes prominence coming first, followed by English, and finally Spanish. To the casual observer, this suggests that the Catalan

language is seen as most important. However, an argument could be made for priority being placed on Spanish, as it is the only language that matches the yellow of the three symbols representing an escalator, stairs, and flight departures.

(B) Barcelona Metro

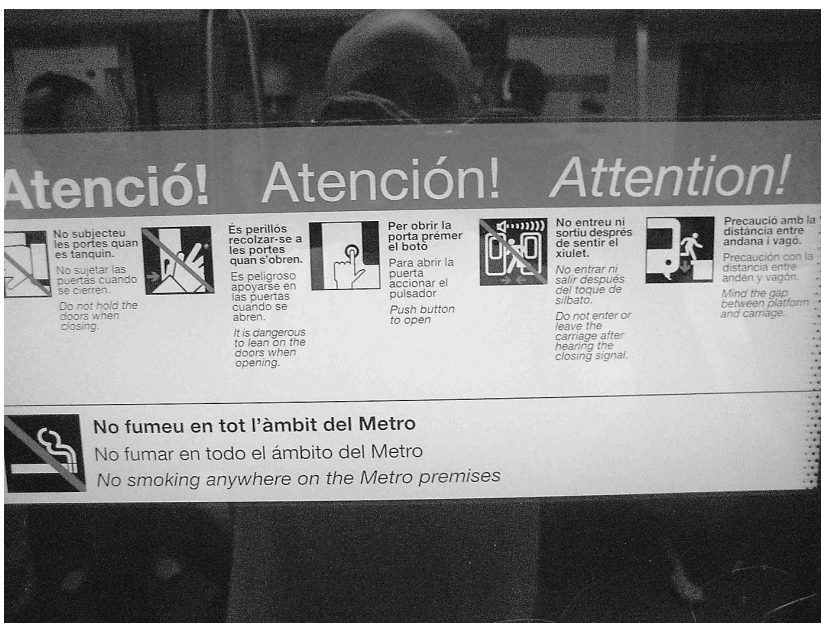


Photo 2 : Sign on Barcelona Metro (Transports Metropolitans de Barcelona)

As the photograph of the “attention” sign shows, once again three languages are represented. As in the case of the airport sign, the three languages are written in the same size lettering (in the top, middle, and lower band of the sign). Once again, the Catalan language takes precedence coming first (Atenció!). However, the Spanish language comes second (Atención!), and the English language (Attention!) third. Interestingly, the English language in this sign is italicized. In order to further prioritize the Catalan language, it is the only



Photo 3 : Sign on hotel door

language of the three that is produced in bold form. In both the middle band and lower band of the sign, the same order and styles of writing are used for each of the three languages. It should also be noted that there are symbols to represent each of the five instructions in the middle band of the sign, and a further symbol in the lower band of the sign that complements the written message of “no smoking” (that is written in the three languages).

### (C) Apsis Porta Marina Hotel

The hotel “do not disturb” sign is also written in the same three languages with a figure of a tired and yawning human at the top. The languages are all written in the same size font in upper case letters, but none of the languages is represented in bold lettering. Once again, the Catalan language takes precedence coming first (NO MOLESTEU), followed by the Spanish (NO MOLESTEN) and the English (DO NOT DISTURB). The Catalan and English writing is in black lettering, whereas the Spanish is in white. Therefore, as for the airport departures sign, a case could be made for believing the Spanish language is prioritized as it stands out as being represented in a different color.

### (D) Public Bicycle Rental

The public bicycle rental sign has two languages - Catalan and Spanish, in that order. The order is the only difference, the same lettering style and format being used for both languages. It is perhaps a surprise that there is no English language provision for a mode of transportation that appears popular with tourists.

### (E) Shop

The shop advertising itself for installations and repairs for water, gas and electricity uses two languages, Spanish and Catalan. In this case, it is the Spanish that takes precedence (INSTALACIONES Y REPARACIONES DE AGUA,

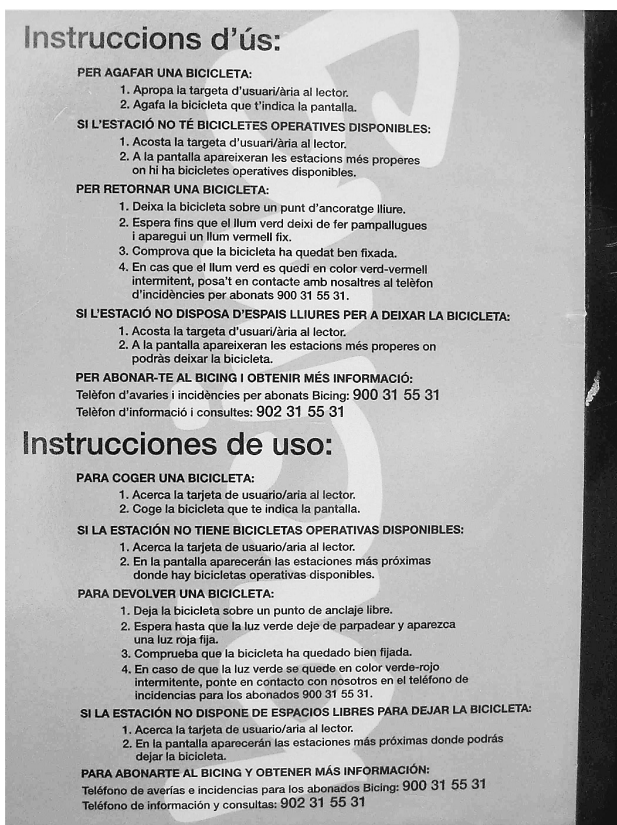


Photo 4 : Sign at El Bicing (Barcelona city bicycles)



Photo 5 : Shop front sign in Barcelona city

GAS Y ELECTRICIDAD) coming above the Catalan (INSTAL·LACIONS REPARACIONS D'AIGUA GAS ELECTRICITAT). Even though the two languages use the same size lettering, in this case it is the Spanish language as opposed to the Catalan language that is written in bold. From this fact, one might surmise that the proprietor of the shop prioritizes the Spanish language. However, in a smaller handwritten sign just visible in the bottom right corner of the photo, a message explaining that the shop is

closed for the holidays (tancat per les vacances) is written in Catalan only.

#### Discussion and Questions

The five photographs from different locations in the city give us an introduction to the LL of Barcelona. Kallen and Ni Dhonnacha (2010, p.21) state that the “natural expectation might be that multilingual sign texts should convey the same information in each of the languages in the text.” However, they continue by explaining that this is not always the case, for example, when the sign creator has different levels of knowledge in the differing linguistic codes. They also cite Lanza and Wodermariam (2009) who provide another reason for a multilingual sign conveying differing information in the different codes, that being the attempt to reach a different audience through using a different language. In the five signs in Barcelona analyzed above, all have “textual symmetry” in that they convey the same information in each language. There is no attempt to reach a different audience with an altered or different message, and there is no change in message caused by varying differences in proficiency of the respective linguistic codes. This is to be expected (but is not always the case) in top-down multilingual signage where the official nature of the signs should mean adequate research has gone into creating good translations.

Gorter (2008) states that the steps taken for the preservation of Catalan have been “remarkable.” Gorter points out that the “policies culminate in measures in high-prestige domains such as public administration, higher education and the media” (p.170). This means that Catalan is one of the strongest minority languages in terms of reversing language shift.

This revitalization of the language takes many forms. Drysdale (2001) points out that the Catalan language now has dedicated newspapers, periodicals, radio stations and television stations. She states that, “The Law on Language Standardisation in Catalonia (1983) states that Catalan is the language of education at all levels” (p. 126). She does, however, point out that all children are expected to know Spanish by the end of primary education and that teachers are expected to be bilingual. We can see, therefore, that a bilingual environment would seem to prevail in Barcelona.

According to Cenoz and Gorter (2009, p. 57), in Catalonia “there is a legal obligation to display at least some presence of the Catalan language on all public and private signs.” To the casual observer, this



certainly seems to be the case. From observations of the multilingual signs in Barcelona, of which only a representative sample are shown in this paper, interesting questions for more detailed study arise. Those questions include: Do all top-down signs provide Catalan before Spanish? What is the policy concerning use of different colors for different languages on signs? Are there any particular authorities that prioritize Spanish over Catalan? Do bottom-up signs usually follow the lead of the top-down signs and have Catalan before Spanish? To what extent is the English language represented on signs in Barcelona? Is English representation on signs just within the major tourist areas or is it more widespread? How much Catalan only signage exists? Are there many law-defying Spanish only signs? To what extent is multilingual signage enforced by law? What are the attitudes of Catalan and Spanish speakers in Barcelona to multilingual signs? What do foreign tourists think of the signage in Barcelona?

## 5.2 The linguistic landscape in Edinburgh, Scotland

As motorists on the A1 cross the border from England into Scotland, they are met with a sign stating *Welcome to Scotland - Fàilte gu Alba*, the Scottish Gaelic language alongside English on the first sign inside Scotland. Just over an hour later, the traveler will reach Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland. It is located in Lothian and has a population of slightly less than half a million people (General Register Office for Scotland, 2014).

For the traveler to Edinburgh, one of the more popular guidebooks would be Lonely Planet's guide to Scotland (Wilson & Murphy, 2006). From the snapshot to the city section, we learn that one of the first laws passed in the new Scottish parliament building (opened 2004) was one that gave official status to the Gaelic language. Ager (2003, p.61) has stated that, "Gaelic is now recognized as a national asset." Wilson and Murphy, however, sum up local attitudes to Gaelic in Scotland by clearly stating:

Opinion in Scotland is deeply divided, between those who believe Gaelic should receive state support in the form of bilingual signage, a dedicated Gaelic TV channel and school classes taught in Gaelic, and those who feel that Gaelic is irrelevant to modern Scotland and should be allowed to die a natural death if it cannot survive without external funding. (p.26)

In fact, according to the 2011 Census, only 1.1% of the population (58,000 people) was able to speak Gaelic (Scotland's Census, 2011). The places where the majority of people speak Gaelic "are the Western Isles and parts of Skye" (Puzey, 2007, p.48). Both of those areas are a considerable distance from the capital, Edinburgh.

Taking all this into account, what can the casual observer expect to see in the LL of Scotland's administrative center and capital, Edinburgh, and what does the LL tell us about language use in society in the city?

The location for observation was the Royal Mile, a popular tourist destination with a variety of attractions and shops, stretching between Edinburgh Castle and the Palace of Holyroodhouse. In spite of the many shops, buildings and signs on display, for the casual observer the only noticeable signs in Scottish Gaelic were around the Scottish parliament building.

Three photos of multilingual signs taken in the summer of 2009 in one location (outside the parliament building) give us an insight into the English-dominated language life in the city. The photos were taken outside the Scottish parliament building, situated at the lower end of the Royal Mile.

## Observations

### (A) Royal Mile - Scottish Parliament Building (1)



Photo 6 : Sign at entrance of Scottish parliament building

The first photo (photo 6) uses two languages, English (Scottish Parliament Public Entrance) and Scottish Gaelic (Pàrlamaid na h-Alba Doras a' Phobaill). This is the official entrance sign and although both languages are represented, it is clear to see that it is the English language that takes precedence, not only coming first on the sign, but also being more prominently written in bold letters. However, the building itself could be considered the ultimate symbol of authority in Scotland, and

therefore any signs on the building itself are of the top-down variety. The fact that the Scottish government has authorized representation of the Scottish Gaelic language on its own building's signs carries an important symbolic message of support for the minority language.

### (B) Royal Mile - Scottish Parliament Building (2)

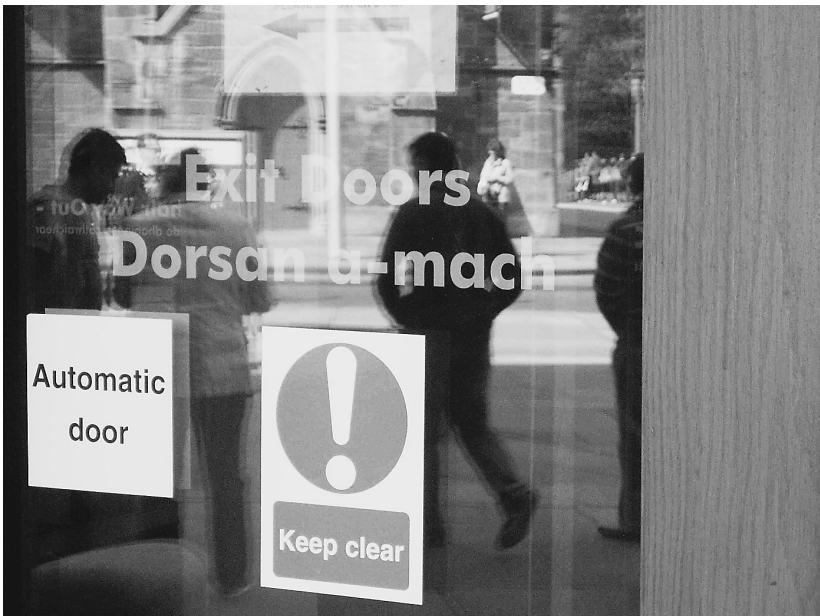


Photo 7 : Sign at exit doors of Scottish parliament building

The second photo (photo 7) is of the exit door to the Scottish parliament building. There are three separate signs on this door. The main sign uses two languages, English and Scottish Gaelic, and they are represented with the same size and style of lettering. However, it is the English (Exit Doors) that comes before the Scottish Gaelic (Dorsan a-mach). It is interesting to see that the other two signs (Automatic door and Keep Clear), that take the form of stickers applied to the door, forego any Scottish Gaelic, using

only the English language. There is, therefore, some inconsistency in the language policy of signs on the parliament building. The more permanent signs appear in two languages, whereas the stickers that appear to be less permanent are represented only in English.

(C) Royal Mile - Scottish Parliament Building (3)



Photo 8 : Sign attached to the Scottish parliament building

The third photo (photo 8) is of a welcome sign attached to the Scottish parliament building. In this sign, along the top band of the sign we can see a welcome message in both English and Scottish Gaelic. The English (WELCOME TO THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT) is more prominent than the Scottish Gaelic (FÀILTE GU PÀRLAMAID NA H-ALBA), being written in a bolder and darker font. In the top left corner of the sign, beneath the symbol of the Scottish Parliament, we see the English words (The Scottish Parliament) above the Scottish

Gaelic translation (Pàrlamaid na h-Alba). These languages are represented in the same size lettering but it is the English that is above the Scottish Gaelic. Elsewhere on the sign, all the remaining information concerning opening times and admission costs is written solely in English. This sign shows that a symbolic act is being carried out in providing some Scottish Gaelic, however, the main information on display on the sign is provided only in English.

### Discussion and Questions

At the top end of the Royal Mile lies the National Museum of Scotland. The museum provides maps of the museum in nine different languages, one of those being Scottish Gaelic. One exhibit also showed a few short video clips of Scottish citizens speaking Scottish Gaelic. However, unlike the Scottish parliament building, it had no Scottish Gaelic signs on show. Not all of the authorities are providing top-down multilingual signs in English and Scottish Gaelic. However, the Scottish Gaelic language is represented on the signs of the institution with arguably the highest authority in the land, the Scottish parliament building.

Those signs are multilingual in nature, and photos 1 and 2 show textual symmetry throughout, with a Scottish Gaelic translation provided for the English. In photo 3, there is textual symmetry provided in the top band of the sign only with a welcome message in both languages. However, the rest of the information is provided in English only.

Concerning the LL of Edinburgh, it is hard to conclude from these observations that at this stage, the provision of Scottish Gaelic signs is for anything more than symbolic reasons. However, symbolic reasons can also carry weight. Commenting on the bilingual sign initiative in the north of Scotland as long ago as 2003, a Scottish government minister commented, “the wider provision of these signs will complement the work the Executive is doing to support the social, cultural and educational value of the Gaelic language. It is also expected that the new signs will have a positive impact on improving the tourism experience people have when they visit the Highlands and western Isles” (The Scottish Government, 2003).

Interesting questions for further study concerning the LL of Edinburgh include: Has the bilingual sign

initiative in the north of Scotland had any knock-on effect on the capital, Edinburgh? Do the institutions and authorities (including the Scottish parliament) in Edinburgh have concrete plans for multilingual signs in the city? Have there been any local businesses that have provided bottom-up signs that include Scottish Gaelic? What are local citizens' latest opinions on the creation of bilingual English/Scottish Gaelic signs? What do tourists think of the idea of providing bilingual signs in the Scottish capital?

## 6. Conclusion

The LL of any geographical area can give us an insight into the multilingual (or monolingual) nature of that place. The two cities, Barcelona and Edinburgh, have very different LLs. To the casual observer of signage in Barcelona, it is quite clear that two languages, Catalan and Spanish, co-exist in the daily lives of those who live in the city. Judging from the order and the size of notation of the languages on the signs, we can hypothesize that in general, the Catalan language is given precedence over Spanish. However, more detailed analysis of top-down signs and bottom-up signs is needed to confirm this preliminary observation. We can also hypothesize that due to the number of English language signs in Barcelona, there is recognition of the importance of English as a lingua franca for tourists.

In contrast, Scottish Gaelic signs were conspicuous by their absence in the city of Edinburgh. The only signs on show on the Royal Mile were those used symbolically on signs at the Scottish parliament building. It would seem clear that we could hypothesize that the Scottish Gaelic language does not play a large part in the language life of the majority of those in Edinburgh. However, in the future, it would be interesting to see whether other authorities, local businesses, and individuals in Edinburgh follow the lead from the Scottish parliament and provide some Scottish Gaelic on the signs that they display.

People produce signs for a purpose. The signs carry meaning and a message, and are often created for an intended audience. The context in which we find the signs can tell us much about the sociolinguistic ecology of the place. In minority language settings, whether there be an abundance or paucity of multilingual signage, much can be gained from studying the LL.

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