Evaluative responses to Spanish in Basel’s Linguistic Landscape

Abstract: Linguistic landscapes (LL) studies have focused mainly on describing and analyzing written text found in public spaces in terms of language vitality or prevalence (e.g., Landry and Bourhis 1997; Barni and Bagna 2010). Few studies have taken into consideration how people interact with the LL text (e.g., Dagenais et al. 2009; Garvin 2010). In this paper I aim to examine the mental and emotional responses of Spanish-speaking migrants and Swiss nationals to the presence of Spanish in Basel’s LL. I am particularly interested in assessing how people think other members of their own group respond to the presence of Spanish in the public arena, and whether their personal thoughts and feelings are in line with what they think others perceive.

I expect Spanish-speaking migrants to report positive attitudes. I base this prediction on studies such as Garvin (2010), in which the author finds that Latino migrants to Memphis (USA) perceive the presence of Spanish in the LL as a sign of community growth, and Zentella (2007), in which the author stresses the importance Spanish has among Latino migrants in maintaining cultural values. On the contrary, I expect Swiss nationals to report negative attitudes. I base this prediction on studies such as Flubacher (2013) and Yeung (2016), in which the authors point out that Swiss authorities see language maintenance among migrants as a threat to successful integration into Swiss society, and call attention to the fact that this discourse has permeated into the ideology of the general population.

To test these hypotheses, I adapted Garvin’s (2010) “walking tour methodology” into a virtual stroll of the city’s areas in which Spanish is presented. Concisely, after ensuring awareness of the presence of Spanish in Basel’s LL, I presented participants with pictures of the LL in which Spanish was displayed and asked them how they think members of their own group feel at the sight of this language in the LL of the city, and whether their feelings are similar to those of their peers. It is noteworthy that, to avoid any self-consciousness, a person of Spanish descent interviewed migrants from Spain, a person of Latin American origin consulted Latin American migrants, and a Basel native questioned Swiss nationals. I analyzed participants’ answers drawing from a qualitative analysis based on a discursive-interactive approach which departs from the idea that attitudes “emerge within the context of the interactional structure; and [...] are expressed under the influence of the situational context, which includes both larger ideologies present in a culture and the immediate context of the interactants” (Liebscher and Dailey-O’Cain 2009).

Results show that, as expected, Latin American and Spanish migrants report positive attitudes. They link the presence of Spanish to a sense of belonging to a broader community of Spanish speakers within city limits. On the other hand, Swiss nationals report negative attitudes, in that they fear Spanish maintenance may jeopardize migrants’ integration. However, they also report positive attitudes, in that they deem the presence of Spanish in the LL to be a sign of Basel’s multicultural character, which is something they praise.
References


Flubacher, Mi-Cha. 2013. Language(s) as the Key to Integration? The Ideological Role of Diglossia in the German-Speaking Region of Switzerland. In Erzsébet Barát, Patrick Studer & Jiří Nekvapil (eds.), *Ideological Conceptualizations of Language: Discourses of Linguistic Diversity*, 171-192. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.


