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Linguistic Landscape of Bolton - Multilingual Signs of Small Businesses

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1 Introduction

This report will investigate the linguistic landscape of Bolton, a smaller town north-west of Manchester. Since no research had been conducted in this area at the beginning of the semester, our group agreed to focus on Bolton. As the data of the Bolton Council (2013) shows, many other languages than English are represented and spoken in the area. Those are primarily Gujarati, Urdu, Punjabi and Polish, which is why we expected those four languages to be found on signs of small businesses in the area. In order to find out more about their display, we wrote up three research questions:

1. What languages are presented on the signs of small businesses in Bolton?
2. What is the motivation behind displaying different languages on the signs?
3. What languages are spoken in the shop (between members of staff, between staff and customers, between customers)?

For our preliminary literature research, we tried to get an overview on the studies of linguistic landscapes, which basically analyse signs to show how languages, cultural priorities, power and politics operate in a specific area (Nash 2016). We found that just as the application we are using for our research, *LinguaSnapp*, a similar software, called *MapGeoLing*, had been developed in order to map immigrant languages on signs in an area in Rome (Barni and Bogna, cited in Gorter 2013). Also, spoken interviews have been carried out in previous studies (Gorter 2013), which focus on signs of small businesses as well. We looked at a study conducted by Bogatto and Helot (2010), who investigated the linguistic landscape of an area in Strasbourg, focusing on commercial signs of shop fronts and their purposes, i.e. whether they are displayed for a knowledgeable or non-knowledgeable public. Furthermore, Cenoz and Gorter (2006) analysed the languages displayed in shopping streets in the Basque Country, Spain and Friesland, the language's status and its influence on language use.

For our data collection and evaluation we did not make many changes to our initial plan. However, as opposed to our original intention to not only interview shop owners but also customers, we only spoke to shop owners for the following reasons: in many shops, e.g. travel agencies, there were no customers, and in others they were too busy and some customers did not speak sufficiently English. Moreover, just as Cenoz and Gorter (2006) did, we included shops with not only multilingual signs concerning the shop itself but also multilingual advertisements in their shop windows because those, too, show what kind of clientele they have.

Before recapitulating our methodology and presenting our findings, we would like to note that when we agreed on investigating the linguistic landscape of Bolton, there were no photos uploaded to *LinguaSnapp* in that area, so that we could really do some ground-breaking research. For this reason we had also been recommended, at the beginning of the semester, to focus on either Oldham, Rochdale or on Bolton. A few weeks into our research, however, we found photos located on Derby Street, that were not ours. We decided to upload pictures of shops that are not yet on the map and add the information we collected in our interviews. However, many of the pictures we had been taking overlapped with those already uploaded on *LinguaSnapp*.

2 Methodology / Experience of conducting our research

In the following two chapters, we will recapitulate our chosen methodology – conducting interviews – as well as go into the difficulties we encountered when we applied this method.

2.1 Conducting our interviews

On our first trip to Bolton on Wednesday, 8th March, we had explored several areas prior to our fieldwork. We had visited many agencies and eventually had been told that Derby Street was located in the most culturally diverse area of Bolton. Hereon, we had used the smartphone application *LinguaSnapp* to take photos of the signs on the street with foreign languages on them. After finding many different shops we had had our route planned for the second trip. After we returned to Manchester, we discussed what questions we were going to answer so we could be fully prepared for our second outing. We agreed that conducting spoken interviews would lead to better results than handing questionnaires to the shop owners since, as Healey and Rawlinson explain, it enables us to “clarify any ambiguous questions, probe answers that are too brief, and query discrepancies in the replies” (1993: 341).

On our second trip to Bolton, we returned to Derby Street and entered the shops we had previously taken photos of and then asked the following questions:

1. What languages are presented on the shop signs?
2. What is the motivation behind displaying different languages on the signs?
3. What languages are spoken in the shop (between members of staff, between staff and customers, between customers)?
4. What is the shop owner’s most comfortable language?

Our methodology follows a quick concise style in which we can ask our questions efficiently. We believed that a fewer number of questions was the correct procedure to follow because we did not want to consume too much of the interviewees' time as due to their likely busy schedule as well as disturb the shop by distracting customers. Before interviewing the shop owners, we made sure that we approached them politely and friendly so that they were more willing to take the time out and give us answers.

After completing our field trip, we consequently added our data on to *LinguaSnapp* to the pictures we had previously taken. With regards to question two, we discovered that often the motivation was for authenticity to entice customers with the same background. International shops similar to the places we had interviewed in Bolton have a densely populated international market, it is effective to commodify culturally distinctive items, particularly food. Therefore, publications in their own languages are more welcoming to those of the same background (Hannerz, 1992). With regards to the third question, our reasoning to create this question can be clarified by Spencer's (2011) point that the public-sector workplaces are often influenced by their language practices and the behaviour of public policies, thus it is important to understand the reason the owners and shop assistants speak the languages they choose.

2.2 Difficulties

Some of our predicted difficulties arose when we visited Bolton for the second time. Some of the shop owners were not willing to take part in an interview or said they were too busy. Unfortunately, some shops were unable to take part in our interview due to reasons such as the shop being in its peak time with a plethora of customers (giving no time to take part). We resolved this by continuing the interviewing process with other shops and returned shortly afterwards. However, although we always tried to explain in detail what we were doing, we sometimes had to respect some shop owners' rejections.

In some cases, the owner's English speaking skills were not satisfactory enough to answer the questions. This part of the methodology agrees with Rosenberg's point that some migrants who move to English dominant countries want to learn English but are unable to do so; this is because they face potential barriers to high-quality tuition (Simpson et al 2011). We often had to rephrase the questions to a more understandable level of English so that they were certain they knew what question they were answering, as rarely they would be asked such a question, especially since many customers often spoke their native language with the owner. Still, on the

occasion we could not complete the interview because the standard of English was not high enough to finish.

Another reason we had not expected was the call to prayer, which was the reason why one of the shop owners could not take part in our interview. Furthermore, many shops were closed although we visited Derby Street on a weekday in the afternoon. We had the impression that some shops had varying opening hours.

3 Findings

Next, we will present our findings, focusing on what kind of shops / small businesses we found, what sorts of signs there were and which languages we saw. We will do so on the basis of three businesses: Kazee's Silk Centre, the butcher Sklep Mięsny and the Kurdistan Sweet Shop. As our research was focused on a few examples only and is thus qualitative we decided to present these in detail rather than showing the results in graphs as you would do it for quantitative findings. The shops we found were small businesses and varied in their nature. Some of them were restaurants, some were fast food shops and others sold clothes and fabric. The most common languages amongst our findings were Urdu; Kurdish, Polish and Persian were also common. The signs in general were simply the name of the shop in a foreign language. We also saw posters and adverts in foreign languages and often these posters would advertise cheap international calls or banking services.

3.1 Kazee's Silk Centre

At Kazee's Silk Centre, there was a large sign saying "Kazee's Silk Centre" located above the shop window (appendix 2). Comparatively small and inconspicuous, there were further three languages above the shop door, all placed next to each other (appendix 1). We went in to enquire about the languages and were met by the owner of the store. The shop was full of various silk rolls and other fabrics. There were no other multilingual signs inside. The shop owner told us that the languages on the sign above the entrance were Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati and English and that the signs read "Kazee's Silk Centre". He told us that the signs were for the benefit of customers who could not speak English, and that all four languages were spoken in the shop. The shop owner further explained that some of his customers could not speak English, but most could. He then told us that by having the sign in the three languages, it provided authenticity to customers who were of an

Indian background. The shop owner himself was from India. He said that amongst staff, Urdu was the main language of communication but English was often spoken and sometimes also Gujarati. The shop owner himself felt comfortable in four languages but most comfortable speaking Urdu, Gujarati and English. Whilst we were in the shop, a shop worker was speaking Urdu to a customer and our interviewee noted that this was very typical. He was very positive about our study, and explained that he thought being able to speak different languages was a positive thing and told us that he encouraged his children to learn languages. Our interviewee gave us his business card and we attempted to contact him again to ask further questions about the Gujarati speaking community in Bolton but we were unable to reach him.

3.2 SKLEP MIĘSNY

The sign of the Polish Butchers (appendix 3) is located outside the shop above the entrance, saying "SKLEP MIĘSNY K&M Butchers". The translation of *sklep mięsny* is simply 'butcher's shop'. We entered the Polish butcher's shop and asked if we could speak to the manager and were directed to the butcher. We asked him about the motivation behind the sign and he told us it was for Polish customers so they could identify with their own language. He noted that it added authenticity to the shop and also attracted other customers of an eastern European background. He told us that the main language spoken in the shop was Polish, but he noted that English was also spoken. He also informed us that some of his customers were Czech and Slovakian, and that Czech and Slovak were spoken amongst customers in the shop. The shop owner himself said that he could understand Czech and Slovak to a degree. He told us that he was quite comfortable speaking English and Polish but he preferred to speak Polish. He said this was typical of his staff and customers, but also added that a few customers were unable to speak English.

3.3 Kurdistan Sweet Shop

We entered the Kurdistan Sweet Shop (appendix 4) and were greeted by a shopkeeper who was sat behind the counter. The shop was quiet so he agreed to talk and explained that his English wasn't very good. He said he was from Iraq and told us that the signage outside the shop was Kurdish and that it said Kurdistan Sweet Shop. He also told us that Kurdish and Arabic were the main languages spoken in the shop and that English was sometimes spoken but less frequently. He had some trouble answering our questions, so we had to make sure we were speaking as clearly as possible. He informed us that many of his customers were Kurdish, and that they sold products

that were available in the UK such as Coca Cola but imported them from the Middle East due to the flavour being different. Interestingly he explained to us that he had lived in Italy for years and as such spoke Italian, he noted that he didn't have any opportunities to speak Italian in the shop but that he was far more comfortable speaking Italian than English, he missed speaking Italian and wished he had further opportunities to speak it. Finally, when asked why the signs were written in Kurdish too, he said it was to attract Kurdish customers to let them know they stocked Kurdish goods and were authentic.

4 Discussion of the Findings

Our research, especially as far as Sklep Mięsnny and Kazee's Silk Centre were concerned, highlights the interaction between multilingual communities within their businesses. Sklep Mięsnny's bilingual signage with English and Polish had the goal to add authenticity and assert the Polish identity of the business, but also to attract speakers of other Eastern European languages; thus, the use of Polish on the sign is predominantly emblematic and its presence is not necessarily to communicate what the shop is to Polish speakers, but more to construct a sense of Polish identity and an affiliation with Eastern Europe.

With Kazee's Silk Centre, the presence of both Devanagari (Hindi) and Persian-Arabic (Urdu) scripts on the signage could be emblematic of the shop's stock and ethos, which welcomes customers who want to purchase clothes for Indian cultural attire and for Islamic clothing. The translation of the shop's name, however, is purely emblematic and not needed for communication, as everyone clearly sees the shop's products – colourful dresses – in the shop window and the sign is also rather small, especially in comparison to the English sign; you would first see the products and then be able to read the shop's name. As Asadova et al. (2015) and also Bannister et al. (2016) mentioned in their reports it is typical for many businesses to have cultural or religious reference, either in the signage itself or in terms of their products. The presence of Gujarati too also demarcates the shop owner's affiliation with the language, and could be too a personal stylistic choice as the sign maker, as he felt most comfortable speaking it alongside English. By presenting the three scripts, Kazee's could be emblematically showing inclusivity towards customers (Gaiser & Matras 2016).

A deeper analysis shows that almost all shop signs are supposed to transmit authenticity or have a purely emblematic function, even though some of the shop owners might not be aware of

this. When we asked the owner of a kebab shop why he put an Arabic sign (duplicating an English text) at the front of his restaurant, he simply replied that it was food from Dubai so he wrote it in Arabic too. The Kurdistan Sweet Shop and a restaurant called “Kurdistan Restaurant” both stated that they want to make it clear they are Kurdish and enhance the “Kurdishness” of their businesses.

As our project dealt with signage on small businesses, all the signs we analysed are bottom-up signs, i.e. they have been designed and put there by private individuals, typically the shop owner or founder, and so they can display a great variety of languages (cf. Ben Rafael et al. 2006). The combination of languages is usually emblematic and represents either a certain country as it is the case with Kazeer’s Silk Centre or the languages are meant to attract customers of different backgrounds, i.e. the motive behind them is purely economical as they adapt to the market which includes a great number of people from the Middle East as well as a number of people from Eastern Europe (this can be seen above all in travel agencies).

Generally speaking, English plays an important role – many shops have only their main signs in languages other than English but for example price tags and washing instructions for the dresses in a clothing shop were all in English as they are meant to be sold either in the United Kingdom or to communities speaking many different languages so that putting texts in a language almost everyone understands at least to a certain degree is just the easiest way. English is also being used when customers and staff do not share another language or when they feel very comfortable speaking English. Some shop owners were a bit astonished when we asked them whether they also spoke English in their shop because it seemed to be normal to them that English was spoken among other languages and they apparently thought that we were only interested in these other languages.

Even though our findings are just a few qualitative samples – due to the limited time of only one semester, our small group, other difficulties and outer circumstances as for example closed shops and due to the fact that we had not had previous experience in conducting this kind of research – we hope that they can give an insight into the ethnic composition of a small area of Greater Manchester. Understanding the interaction between different languages and cultures in a certain area is important for diversity management, i.e. institutions providing, developing and planning services for local communities such as healthcare or education.

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6 Appendix

Appendix 1: Kazee's Silk Centre 1



Appendix 2: Kazee's Silk Centre 2



Appendix 3: SKLEP MIĘSNY



Appendix 4: Kurdistan Sweet Shop

