Language and Space: Language Ideologies in the Linguistic Landscape of Stornoway, Scotland

Cassie Smith-Christmas

University of the Highlands and Islands, United Kingdom

This paper discusses the relationship between language and physical space in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, Scotland. Stornoway is the main urban centre in the Western Isles, an area long considered the traditional heartland of Scottish Gaelic, a minority language spoken by 57,602 speakers according to the 2011 Census. Recent Gaelic language revitalisation efforts have increased the visibility of Gaelic in the public space both at the national and local level; in Stornoway, for example, the Western Isles’ governing body, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, explicitly states a bilingual policy for all signage of council-owned property (e.g. street signs, public facilities such as libraries) and further stipulates that the Gaelic text should appear in a more prominent position and font than the English text. A number of private sector businesses in Stornoway have also adopted the use of bilingual signs, although the amount of Gaelic used, and the status is afforded to the language through physical attributes such as placement and font size, varies from business to business. This paper discusses the relationship between linguistic landscapes and language ideologies, and in particular, investigates how private sector spaces display their orientations to language ideologies by (a) the total amount of Gaelic used in their signs (b) the status afforded to Gaelic by its placement, font size, etc. and (c) the function of what the Gaelic content imparts. The paper then discusses Stornoway’s linguistic landscape as a whole (both private and public sector spaces) and situates this discussion within wider discourses of the relationship between language and identity in Scotland, particularly in terms of the discourses about Gaelic’s role in the public space.

Keywords: Linguistic landscapes; Scottish Gaelic; Language Ideologies.