Making oral traditions "visible": Multimodal linguistic landscapes of Indigenous language communities in Colombia

Nicole Bruskewitz¹, Gerriet Janssen²

¹Universidad de los Andes, Colombia
²University of Hawai’i, Manoa, USA

Linguistic landscape studies have sought to explore sociolinguistic phenomenon in multilingual communities, particularly by examining visual semiotics. Signs have been considered as a primary source to understand how language is represented within a society, both publically and commercially (Pillar, 2001). Advocates of new literacies suggest "non-textual" elements in the landscape can be "readable texts" (Gee, 2011; Street, 2000). This approach has several problems: It assumes that (a) all cultures prefer text-based expression; (b) text is only considered to be alphabetic (c) non-textual features are not salient for analysis. These assumptions raise the questions: What does the linguistic landscape of speech communities based in oral traditions contain, and how could documentation of alternative texts offer insights into their linguistic landscape(s)?

This study emerged from four research trips to the eastern plains of Colombia, a region whose great linguistic diversity is currently threatened. Several spaces were visited: rural incorporated towns, protected Indigenous communities, tourist sites, and sacred Indigenous landmarks. Through photography, participant-observation, recording stories and interviews, a multimodal characterization of the linguistic landscape was created through different spaces and times.

Preliminary findings show that in multilingual, commodified and institutional spaces, Spanish text dominates the visual realm (e.g., in incorporated towns, tourist sites, or even in the protected Indigenous areas themselves). However, Indigenous languages populate these landscapes, though not necessarily in the textual domain, challenging traditional conceptions of how to describe linguistic landscapes. Relevant semiotics included speech, songs, drawings, symbols: "readable texts" according to new literacy theory (Gee, 2011; Street, 2000). Also, different visual claims for territory happen through the commodification of indigenous symbols in public and institutional spaces. Local actors–paralleling frameworks discussing the preservation and maintenance of endangered languages–propose that Indigenous language conservation depends upon the degree of institutional representation: text-based and other commercial media uses of the language (Fishman, 1991; UNESCO).

Keywords: linguistic landscapes, Indigenous languages, multimodality.