Signs of the Times: A Discourse Perspective on Public Signage, Space and the Law

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This paper contributes to the study of linguistic landscapes (Shohamy & Gorter, eds, 2009) by analysing warning and prohibition signs in urban settings. On the basis of data collected in British cities, it explains how directive signs reflect the interplay of language, law, space and society (Mautner, 2012). Primarily conceptual in orientation but with a strong empirical base, the paper explores how the performativity of directive signs is constituted both by where they are placed and by implicit or explicit references to legal authority.

By taking a socio-legal perspective, and considering the intertextual links between signs and the legal code, the paper addresses issues hitherto neglected in linguistic landscape research. Moreover, the approach to signage adopted here highlights the significance of space as a discourse analytic category. It would probably be excessive to follow the example of the social sciences (Goodchild and Janelle 2010) and hail a “spatial turn” for discourse analysis. Nevertheless, space deserves more attention in critical discourse studies than hitherto, and indications that research in this area is gaining momentum should be welcomed. For adding a spatial perspective to our discourse-analytic canon certainly promises valuable new insights, particularly where space is bound up in complex webs of relationships with society and the law.

References


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