English in Brussels’ and Amsterdam’s linguistic landscapes: socio-economic stratification, informative and symbolic displays

Mieke Vandenbroucke
Ghent University, Belgium

The study of linguistic landscapes has become a popular sociolinguistic subfield in recent years with numerous studies focusing on urban and multilingual settings and documenting the rise of English as a global language and vehicle of globalization (e.g. Cenoz & Gorter 2006; Backhaus 2007; Bruyèl-Olmedo & Juan-Garua 2009). Similarly, this paper addresses the linguistic landscape of two prominent European global cities, Brussels and Amsterdam, by comparing language display and, in particular, the use of English in commercial discourse in several socio-economically diverse locations in each city. For this purpose, three different and well-known shopping streets were selected in each city: an up-scale, high-end shopping street, a more mainstream, popular shopping street and, finally, an immigrant, diasporic shopping street. In each case, a statistical analysis of language visibility in commercial establishments’ language displays in general was carried out as well as a more interpretative functional analysis of informative and symbolic displays of English in these location-specific commercial discourses. This paper presents the results of these two analyses regarding, on the one hand, the use and visibility of English in commercial discourse across different genres in socio-economically diverse locations in each city and, on the other hand, the communicative value of such displayed English in these settings as both an informative lingua franca and symbolic commodity vis-à-vis stratified socio-economic scales in Brussels and Amsterdam.


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