Global languages in local spaces: Rethinking multilingualism in the linguistic landscape of Toulouse

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Over the past 15 years, one of the basic functions of the Linguistic Landscape (LL) has been to measure and assess the visibility of multiple languages in public spaces. In research carried out around the world, English has recurrently appeared as one of the most important features of the LL, though its classification, and the extent to which its presence renders a space multilingual, remains controversial. In the light of Seargeant’s (2011) and Yano’s (2011) recent claims that English may be considered a feature of the local landscape rather than a language in its own right, this paper explores code classification in the LL of Toulouse. It challenges the concept of ‘global’ languages (Crystal, 1997), and illustrates the ways in which various codes become affected, consumed, and enveloped by the dominant language, French. Not only is this the case for English, but also the regional tongue, Occitan, whose visibility, despite appearing autonomous, may be more accurately considered a part of the French landscape. This illustrates the shortcomings in classifying languages according to fixed, subjective (and often ad hoc) criteria, because even the presentation of so-called ‘foreign’ languages in Toulouse is influenced by, and subject to, local linguistic norms. The implications of this are profound, as we see that French is the driving force behind every language in the city. Moreover, this calls into question the very definition of multilingualism, as LL authors exhibit a preference for the national code even when writing in others. As such, this research will have a meaningful impact on language coding in the LL, and contribute to the advancement of the methodologies by which we measure and analyse multilingualism, language beliefs, and language practices in public spaces.

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