Interpreting the interplay between languages and scripts in the linguistic landscapes of Kuwait and the UK

Barbara Mayor¹, Nay Hannawi²

¹The Open University UK, United Kingdom
²Arab Open University, Kuwait

This presentation examines the creative interplay between languages and scripts on the streets of Kuwait and the UK, specifically some of the ways in which one language is represented via a script conventionally associated with another, and explores how such signage is interpreted in context by a diverse range of readers/receivers.

Much work in the field of linguistic landscape has concentrated on the quantification and classification of languages and scripts in the multilingual environment. This presentation argues that conclusions about the 'language' in which a sign is written based solely on the choice of script are likely to misrepresent the often complex semiotic processes involved in the production and reception of signs.

Previous research (see Seargeant, 2013) has identified three creative processes involved in the production and addressivity of signs in a multilingual environment:

the use of 'simulation' typefaces which may represent English words but, through the use of fonts drawn from non-Roman scripts, serve to index other cultures stereotypically in the manner of 'foreign accents';

product and company names which use typographical distinctiveness or diacritical marks for similar purposes;

the transliteration of English words into another script, akin to lexical borrowing.

Depending on the knowledge and experience of each reader/receiver, such signage may or may not be interpreted as 'English', or as indexing Anglophone culture. There is no guarantee that any ideational meaning will be recognised beyond the symbolic idea of 'Englishness', 'Frenchness', 'Chineseness' etc. Indeed what is verbal to some may be interpreted as simply visual or decorative to others.

Scollon and Scollon (2003) were amongst the first to argue for an ethnographic approach to the interpretation of signs in the linguistic landscape. In this tradition, we examine the responses of both producers and receivers to a diverse range of signage in our two contexts.

Keywords: typeface, transliteration, addressivity.