Book Review: The Linguistic Landscape of Chinatown: A Sociolinguistic Ethnography. Jackie Jia Lou. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. Hardback - 168 pages. ISBN: 9781783095629, Published: 12 May 2016, $139.95 USD.

Andrew Jocuns *

Graduate School of English, Assumption University of Thailand, Thailand

---

Article Info

Book Review

The rise of interest in multilingualism the world over has prompted attention towards linguistic landscapes, roughly defined as the language ecology of a given place and the language in the world around us. This focus on multilingualism and linguistic landscapes has also initiated a number of monograph length studies that focus on a particular city or country. One of the problems with linguistic landscapes has to do with methodology. On the one hand, there is no uniform overarching methodology for analyzing linguistic landscape leaving researchers the opportunity to develop their own or pick and choose from methods utilized previously. On the other hand, the fact that methodology in linguistic landscape research is so open that the unit of analysis may be confusing, such that comparative studies may be difficult. Jackie Jia Lou's ethnography of Washington, DC's Chinatown provides a much needed example of the kind of ethnographic research capable within the research paradigm of linguistic landscapes. Lou's research provides a nuanced and eclectic approach to the problem of linguistic landscapes. The book is divided into six chapters: introduction, methods, three analytical chapters, and conclusion/summary.

* Corresponding author

E-mail address: jocunsa@gmail.com

1. Summary

In Chapter One, "Conceptualizing Linguistic Landscape: Language, Space and Place", Lou's situates her ethnography amongst previous definitions, research, methods, notions of space and place among linguistic landscape studies. Lou notes that there has been a tendency to define linguistic landscape in terms of two functions: informational and symbolic. In terms of the former Information regarding the linguistic situation including speech community boundaries as well as face-to-face interaction is one such function, whereas symbolically linguistic landscape functions to reveal the status of speech communities including which one's have more or less power and/or status in a given territory. Additionally, Lou notes three themes of previous research on linguistic landscapes. First, Lou notes how signs have been identified as being either top-down (government/official signs) or bottom-up (unofficial signs). Second, has been the focus of research examining English as a global language. Third, is the overwhelming focus on the use of digital photographs for the purpose of data collection. Given these trends, Lou's ethnography departs from all three trends focusing instead on a wholistic approach to the problem of linguistic landscape that incorporates ethnographic interviews, signs and objects in the material world, the history of Washington, DC's Chinatown, ethnographic observations, and other methods. This Chapter also includes a thorough discussion of space and place situating these notions within a variety of disciplines including: sociology, human geography, anthropology and sociolinguistics. Lou promotes an integrative framework for her ethnographic approach which is rooted in both Scollon and Scollon's geosemiotics (2003) and nexus analysis (2004). Geosemiotics refers the meaning of the placement of signs in the material world and our social actions with them drawing to three features that make up a semiotic aggregate: the interaction order, visual semiotics and place semiotics. However, Lou's methods modify this approach slightly interweaving methods and analytical tools from other researchers such the concepts of *flow* and *scale* from Blommaert (2005); entextualization from Urban and Silverstein (1996); and resemioticization from Iedema (2001). Lou also notes the importance of Goffman's production format of animator, author and principal juxtaposing it with Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2010) designer, producer and distributor.

Chapter Two, "Approaching Chinatown: Background and Methodology", provides important historical and background information about Washington, DC's Chinatown noting some important spaces that were integral to Lou's ethnography as well as the research methods that were used to carry out the study. These methods included: photography, ethnographic observations, interviews, map-drawing task, video recordings of meetings and social events, and document collection from historical archives. Lou provides a detailed discussion of the impetus for each method used as well as some noted drawbacks, for example map-drawing exercises may be constrained by map literacy. Most importantly in terms of ethnography Lou situates herself within the ethnography noting the role(s) that she held with her participants: most notably ESL instructor and occasional translator.

Chapter Three, "Chinatown as Heterotopia: Urban Revitalization Through Linguistic Landscape", is the first analytical chapter and it introduces Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopia to describe the present status of Washington, DC's Chinatown. Heterotopia refers to a place in which multiple timescales and spaces are occurring in the definition of a particular space. In order to highlight how Chinatown, DC is a heterotopia, Lou uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine several components of the geosemiotics of signs in Chinatown including: language choice, code preference, text vectors and symmetrical composition and emplacement. Language choice refers to the language present on signage; code preference refers to how we can discern which language is preferred on a bilingual sign; text vector notes how the text on a sign is displayed horizontally or vertically; symmetrical composition refers to the symmetrical design which is often a feature of traditional Chinese culture; and emplacement refers to the manner that a sign is displayed. The analysis in this chapter juxtaposes the signage on two different types of stores: Chinese and non-Chinese stores. In effect Chinese stores index a Chinese identity based upon analysis of the geosemiotic makeup of the signs. At the same time non-Chinese stores, which adhere to the mandate to use bilingual signs, show some differences in terms of code preference and color schematics. Hence the mandate to have bilingual signs on the surface suggests a homogenous identity in Chinatown DC, but Lou's careful analysis of the geosemiotics reveals that Chinatown is a heterotopia where different discourses intersect.

Chapter Four, "Situating Linguistic Landscape in Time", provides an ethnographic analysis of the temporal dimension of Chinatown DC. Drawing upon several analytical categories including: Lemke's (2000) notion of timescales, nexus analysis with a focus upon discourse cycles (Scollon & Scollon, 2004), and mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001). Lou's analysis draws attention to different temporal trajectories that emerge in the analysis of the signage of Chinatown DC. Lou notes the emergence of Chinatowns in the USA during the 19th Century as a defensive mechanism against racial hostility. Another temporal dimension concerns different waves of immigrants to the Chinese community of Washington, DC before and after 1965 as a result of the 1965 US immigration act which gave preference to families of immigrants and those who could contribute to the US through professional skills. One part of the analysis focuses upon participation framework which includes a discussion of Goffman's production format of animator, author and principal. One of the focal points of analysis in this chapter are meetings Lou attended concerning the new AT&T flag store's signage. Through this analysis of the participation framework and the meetings for the AT&T signage, Lou identifies several temporal disjunctions along the timescales of Chinatown DC from a century, to urban revitalization in the 1980's, to generational gaps among Chinese immigrants to DC. This chapter reveals how multiple timescales are important to consider in linguistic landscape research revealing how Chinatown DC is a heterotopia along a temporal dimension.

Chapter Five, "Situating Linguistic Landscape in Space", reveals how Chinatown DC has become spatial representation of a Chinatown that includes Chinese aesthetics. Building upon Scollon and Scollon's (2003) notion of the semiotic aggregate using Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck's (2005a, 2005b) notion of polycentrentric neighborhood and the concepts of flow and spatial network, Lou reveals how Chinatown DC has emerged as a ritual place. One of the notable features of Chinatown DC is the friendship archway which is the largest single span archway in the world, in addition to other features of the architectural design of Chinatown such as the lamps, though the latter were never fully implemented due in part to lack of adequate lighting. Another feature Lou identifies about Chinatown DC that makes it a ritual place is that it is the focal point of community events the most important of which is the yearly Chinatown DC

Chinese New Year parade. Again analytically Lou returns to Goffman to discuss how the Chinese New Year parade is a platform event using other concepts from Goffman's interaction order (1983) to discuss analyze the makeup of this event. Lou then introduces an analytical concept from Tourism research, Urry's notion of the tourist gaze, in which tourists to Chinatown DC consume this place through capturing photographic images. An interesting feature of this chapter is how Lou uses the map-making exercise as data. Through the discussion of four maps and their subsequent interviews, Lou illustrates how participants revealed different stances towards language as well as different degrees of involvement in the neighborhood – participants who lived in Chinatown DC juxtaposed with commuters. The final sections of this chapter discuss more features of tourism as well as the connection of Chinatown DC to China as a nation.

Chapter Six, "Conclusion and Reflection" highlights and summarizes the findings that emerged throughout the previous five chapters. The author also situates herself within the ethnography highlighting again her role(s) that she had taken up during her time conducting 18 months of field research. Lastly Lou discusses theoretical contributions noting how this work has gone beyond the tendency of linguistic landscape studies that focus on language policy showing how, "language and discourse shape the production of material space and individuals' spatial practices" (p. 136). Second, Lou notes that an overwhelming trend in sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropology research has tended to focus exclusively on speech as primary data, where on the contrary this ethnography has revealed how written language, spatial practices, visual semiotics, and interactions with signs are important sociolinguistic data.

2. Evaluation

The author did an excellent job in describing in detail the research methods used and how the analysis of them was carried out. As mentioned previously this work provides a much needed monograph on the linguistic landscape of a specific neighborhood that exemplifies a multi-faceted methodology that draws on methods and analytical tools from sociolinguistics, anthropology, geography, and philosophy.

This monograph would be excellent to use as an example of a well-designed piece of research in a variety of courses including: discourse analysis, linguistic anthropology, critical literacy, sociolinguistics, and others. Graduate students and professionals who are conducting research in linguistic landscapes would find this text particularly helpful in terms of research designs and implementation not to mention as an excellent example of an ethnography.

A strongpoint of the book is the different types of data that the author employed to construct this ethnography. I particularly found the map exercise that the author collected to be refreshing in terms of a new approach to linguistic landscape research. I see potential for using map-making exercises in some of my own research. The author also mentioned some potential problems in using map-making exercises as data, most notably the fact that this form of literacy is unique and as such not all literate members of speech community will have access to the same type of map literacy. In fact map-making and map literacy are highly contextualized discursive practices, but as Lou noted they reveal some intriguing relationships between language, discourse and senses of place.

If there is a weakness in this text it would be in the map-making activity itself. Maps, map-making and orienting oneself to a map are not uniform activities, but still I believe it provides a unique set of data to work with. Analytically when analyzing such maps made by individuals it may be difficult to discern idiosyncratic versus community level practices. Does the fact that members of a community draw maps differently reflect on the community or on the individual? One other possible weakness has to do with linguistic landscape studies in general and the fact that the majority of these studies are conducted in urban settings. The rural/urban divide is something that may need to be addressed in linguistic landscape studies in the future. Does the fact that smaller non-urban communities do not have a lot of signage say anything about the linguistic vitality of a language or community of practice at large?

I believe that the strongest part of this book is how the author outlines the methods that will be employed in the first two chapters as well as showing how they are implemented analytically in chapters 3, 4, and 5. In addition, this monograph provides an excellent discussion of timescales and linguistic landscapes highlighting how it is

that different timescales: overlap, are disconnected, are contested, and yet converge to make up the identity of a place. Lastly the author does a great job in situating herself in terms of the role(s) that she had taken up as an ethnographer. Without being overly reflexive, Lou establishes that she was adequately positioned in the community to conduct this ethnography and the final product is indicative of that.

References

Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Blommaert, J., Collins, J., & Slembrouck, S. (2005a). Polycentricity and interactional regimes in 'global neighborhoods.' *Ethnography*, *6*(2), 205–235.

_____. (2005b). Spaces of multilingualism. *Language & Communication*, *25*, 197-216.

Foucault, M. (1986). 'Des espaces autres' [Different Spaces]. *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, *5*, 46-49.

Goffman, E. (1983). The Interaction Order: American Sociological Association, 1982 Presidential Address. *American Sociological Review*, *48*(1), 1-17.

Iedema, R. (2001). Resemiotization. *Semiotica*, (137), 23-39.

_____. (2003). Multimodality, resemiotization: extending the analysis of discourse as multi-semiotic practice. *Visual Communication*, *2*(1), 29-57.

Kress, G. R., & Leeuwen, T. van. (2010). *Reading images: the grammar of visual design* (2nd ed., reprinted). London: Routledge.

Lemke, J. L. (2000). Across the Scales of Time: Artifacts, Activities, and Meanings in Ecosocial Systems. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, *7*(4), 273-290.

Scollon, R. (2001). *Mediated Discourse: The nexus of practice* (1 edition). London; New York: Routledge.

Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. W. (2003). *Discourses in Place.* London: Routledge.

_____. (2004). *Nexus analysis discourse and the emerging Internet*. New York: Routledge.

Silverstein, M., & Urban, G. (1996). *Natural Histories of Discourse*. University of Chicago Press.

Urry, J. (2005). The 'Consuming' of Place. In A. Jaworski (Ed.), *Discourse, Communication, and Tourism* (pp.19-27). Buffalo, NY: Channel View Publications.

Urry, J., & Larsen, J. (2011). *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*. London: SAGE.