Linguistic landscapes in the Netherlands: a study of multilingualism in Amsterdam and Friesland
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6 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

In the present chapter, the findings are further discussed. This study suggests that issues of identity, vitality and power are important in the construction of the linguistic landscape. Therefore, in sections 6.3, 6.4 and 6.5 respectively, the investigated linguistic landscapes are related to these issues. The chapter concludes by offering recommendations for future work in section 6.6. First of all, however, the study is summarised in section 6.2.

6.2 Summary of the Study

This dissertation describes an investigation of the linguistic landscape in the Netherlands. The study took place in both the capital city of Amsterdam with its immigrants and foreign tourists, and in the province of Friesland with its Frisian-speaking minority. Dutch is the official state language of the Netherlands, and the mother tongue of the majority of the population (Eurobarometer 2006: 7). English, which has developed into the world’s major language of wider communication (Cenoz & Jessner 2000), also plays an important role in Dutch society.

The linguistic landscape is a relatively new research subject. Landry & Bourhis (1997: 25) define the concept of linguistic landscape as follows: “The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration.” Landry & Bourhis show that the linguistic landscape is a marker of the vitality of ethnonlinguistic groups in multilingual contexts, and that it also contributes to this vitality. In the present study, Backhaus’ (2006: 55) notion of sign is used: “A sign was considered to be any piece of written text within a spatially definable frame […], including anything from handwritten stickers to huge commercial billboards.”

Ben-Rafael (2009) presents four sociological principles of structuration to explain the diversity in the linguistic landscape, namely presentation of self, good reasons, power relations, and collective identity. Spolsky & Cooper (1991) and
Spolsky (2009) address the motivations behind language choice on signs and formulate three conditions to that end: the sign-writer’s skill condition, the presumed reader condition and the symbolic value condition.


The present study was conducted with the aim of answering the following research questions:

1. To what extent does the linguistic landscape in the Netherlands reflect the languages spoken by the speech community?
2. Which factors influence linguistic and semiotic properties of signs?

The Dutch economy is one of the most highly globalised economies in the world (Thrift 1994). The population of the Netherlands has a relatively good command of foreign languages. Besides Dutch, the three most widely known languages are English, German and French (Eurobarometer 2006). Apart from foreign languages learnt at school, there is another significant group of languages from abroad, namely the languages that immigrants have brought with them to the Netherlands. The immigrants who have settled in the country include citizens from (former) Dutch colonies, so-called guest workers and their families from the Mediterranean area, immigrants from Western countries, and refugees from all over the world. On the basis of the parental birth country criterion, the Dutch are by far the largest population group in the Netherlands. Among the immigrants, the groups from Indonesia, Germany, Turkey, Suriname and Morocco have a relatively large presence. Extra et al. (2002) carried out a large-scale survey on the distribution and vitality of immigrant minority languages in the Netherlands. They found that Turkish, Arabic and Berber are the immigrant languages most frequently spoken at the homes of school children. In terms of language proficiency, language choice, language dominance and language preference, Turkish is the most vital immigrant language. The Dutch government strongly encourages immigrants to acquire and use Dutch.

Of the larger cities in the Netherlands, Amsterdam has the highest percentage of immigrants (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2010). The largest groups have Surinamese, Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds (O+S Amsterdam 2007a). The
many foreign tourists that Amsterdam attracts also give rise to linguistic diversity. The main foreign tourist groups come from the United Kingdom and the United States (O+S Amsterdam 2008).

In the province of Friesland two official languages are used: Dutch, the state language, and the regional minority language of Frisian, which is the home language of a small majority of the population (Gorter 2005). Frisian is much more a spoken than a written language (Gorter & Jonkman 1995). All Frisian speakers also know Dutch. Usually, Dutch is the unmarked language and Frisian the marked one (Gorter 1993). The number of immigrants and foreign tourists in Friesland is relatively small.

The present study comprises a detailed quantitative analysis of linguistic landscapes in the Netherlands, based on the approach developed by Ben-Rafael et al. (2004; 2006) and Cenoz & Gorter (2006). Eight shopping centres were selected for the investigation: five in Amsterdam and three in Friesland. The particular shopping centres were chosen because the neighbourhoods in which they are situated differ greatly in their ethnolinguistic composition. Sections of the shopping centres served as survey areas.

The shopping centres in Amsterdam included Rooswijck, Kalverstraat, Bos en Lommerplein, Javastraat and Ganzenpoort. Rooswijck is a shopping centre in a neighbourhood where mainly Dutch people live. Kalverstraat is the main shopping street in the centre of Amsterdam and is visited by many foreign tourists. Bos en Lommerplein, Javastraat and Ganzenpoort are shopping centres in different neighbourhoods where relatively many immigrants live.

Wirdumerdijk in Leeuwarden, Dijkstraat in Franeker, and Schoolstraat in Burgum constituted the shopping centres in Friesland. Leeuwarden is the provincial capital of Friesland, Franeker is a smaller town and Burgum is a rural village. In both Franeker and Burgum a section of the main shopping street served as the survey area. In Leeuwarden, the survey area consisted of a section of a side street of the main shopping street. The distribution of mother tongues in Leeuwarden, Franeker and Burgum varies. The proportion of native Frisian speakers is lowest in the municipality of Leeuwarden, and highest in the municipality of which Burgum is part. The latter local government has also the most active policy to encourage the use of Frisian.

All the signs in the survey areas were photographed. Only nameplates of residents were left out of consideration. The data collection comprised over 3,000 signs. They were coded according to linguistic features (e.g., languages used, presence of translations), semiotic features (e.g., the order of the texts in different languages) and other features (e.g., government or private sign).
A problematic aspect of the general methodology is that the classification by language of proper names like brand and shop names is not always straightforward. Proper names have a prominent place in the linguistic landscape, and are frequently displayed in a foreign language. It is difficult to establish whether names are part of specific languages or of any language. In the present study every name was assigned to its original language, and it was coded for every sign whether it consisted of proper name(s), other text, or both.

In all the survey areas in Amsterdam and Friesland combined, a total of 31 different languages were found. The nine most often-used languages included national language Dutch, international language English, European languages that seem to have high prestige in advertising in the Netherlands (French, German, Italian, Spanish), regional minority language Frisian, and immigrant minority languages Turkish and Arabic. The use of Dutch or English was by far the most common. Differences between the ethnolinguistic composition of Amsterdam and Friesland’s populations are partly reflected in differences in the linguistic landscapes. The use of Turkish and Arabic in Amsterdam is somehow a manifestation of the presence of immigrants, and the use of Frisian in Friesland is related in complex ways to the speakers of this regional minority language. Ben-Rafael’s (2009) structuration principles and Spolsky & Cooper’s (1991) conditions for language choice help to interpret the outcomes.

The fact that the linguistic landscape reflects the languages spoken by the speech community to some extent is also apparent from comparisons of the individual survey areas in Amsterdam as well as in Friesland. In Amsterdam, Turkish and Arabic were mainly found in neighbourhoods where relatively large amounts of immigrants live. In the survey area in Kalverstraat, a central shopping street, the relative amount of English was greater than in the other, less central neighbourhoods. This may be due to the high number of foreign tourists visiting the centre of Amsterdam. In Friesland, some Frisian was used in the survey areas of Burgum and Franeker, but it hardly occurred in the more urban Leeuwarden survey area. This is related to the larger proportion of native Frisian speakers in Burgum and Franeker.

On multilingual signs, mixing of languages occurred much more often than translation. It follows that the texts in different languages usually gave complementary information.

Factors relating to the type of actor were found to influence linguistic and semiotic properties of signs. On government signs almost no language but the official languages of the Netherlands (Dutch and Frisian) was used. The languages used on private signs, on the other hand, were more diverse. Furthermore, the
proportions of the languages used on shop signs differed according to the sector in question. In the electronics and music sector, for instance, a relatively high percentage of signs included English. It also matters whether an establishment is part of a regional, national or international chain, or is independently owned. For example, minority languages Frisian, Turkish and Arabic were especially used by establishments that were part of regional chains and by independent establishments.

Another important factor is the linguistic content of the signs. There is a difference with regard to the languages used between signs displaying one or more proper names and signs displaying other text. A large majority of the signs with only ‘other text’ were written in Dutch. Signs with only one or more proper names, such as a brand name, were linguistically more diverse.

In both Cenoz & Gorter’s (2006) linguistic landscape study and the present investigation, a central shopping street in Leeuwarden served as a survey area. A comparison showed that the different methodologies used in the two studies yielded some similar and some divergent results. The distribution of Dutch, English and Frisian found was similar. In the present study, the percentage of monolingual signs was larger than in Cenoz & Gorter’s investigation. This difference may be a result of the fact that different definitions of a sign were used.

In summary, the study reported in this dissertation explored the extent to which the linguistic landscape in the Netherlands reflects the languages spoken by the speech community and identified factors that influence linguistic and semiotic properties of signs. The main finding is that Dutch and English prevail, whereas minority languages have a limited presence in the linguistic landscape.

6.3 Linguistic Landscape and Identity

This section discusses what the investigated linguistic landscapes tell us about identity issues. The choice of one language over the other may be of great symbolic value, and can mark the actor’s identity. In Chapter 2, Ben-Rafael’s (2009) sociological framework for linguistic landscape research was discussed, and in Chapter 5 its structuration principles were applied to the data of the present study. Two of the four principles deal with issues of identity, namely collective identity and presentation of self. In one area a language may be used to show the actor’s likeness to a part of the public, while in another area the same language may serve to show the actor’s uniqueness. For instance, Frisian may be used as a display of collective identity in Friesland, while in Amsterdam the Frisian brand name Sonnema may concern the presentation of self. Languages of ethnolinguistic
minority groups as well as ‘outsider languages’ that carry prestige in the Dutch setting turned out to be present in the linguistic landscape, so both principles seem to be at work in different cases.

Spolsky & Cooper (1991), who formulate three conditions for language choice in public signage, also capture the issue of identity, namely in their third rule, which states: ‘Prefer to write signs in your own language or in a language with which you wish to be identified’. This symbolic value condition accounts for language choice and for the order of languages on multilingual signs. The idea of the symbolic value condition is useful in the present study, because special attention was paid to regional minority language Frisian and immigrant minority languages Turkish and Arabic. Although these languages only have a modest quantitative presence in the linguistic landscape (see section 5.2), their symbolic value can be of importance.

One way this comes about is through the design of the signs. In Amsterdam, Arabic ranked sixth among the languages most frequently used on the signs. However, when the languages that most often appear first or with the largest font size on multilingual signs were considered, Arabic was the third language in Amsterdam, after Dutch and English. Arabic appears to be displayed relatively prominently on multilingual signs. This relative prominence in the design of the signs seems to reveal a high symbolic value that the Arabic-speaking immigrants, in particular the linguistic landscape actors, attach to their own language. In Friesland, Frisian is the third language, both when one considers the frequency of occurrence and how often it appears first, or with the largest font size on multilingual signs. Dutch and English are again the first two languages. Just like Arabic in Amsterdam, Frisian in Friesland seems to have a high symbolic value for linguistic landscape actors who speak this language. As noted in Chapter 1, Extra & Gorter (2001) emphasise that regional and immigrant minority languages have much in common. Their symbolic value is one of the similarities between these different kinds of minority languages.

The Frisian-Dutch sign with opening hours that was given in Figure 5.5 is a clear example of the use of language as a display of identity. The owners wrote the text in their own language, Frisian, on top and larger than that in the other language, Dutch. Identity issues were decisive in the choice to use Frisian. In an interview, one of the owners of the ice cream parlour in Franeker expressed that the Frisian language was very important to them and that they felt closely connected to it (Bierma 2008). The owners’ motives are an example of Ben-Rafael’s (2009) principle of presentation of self.

Using a script other than the mainstream Latin script may be seen as a display of collective identity. A sign written in Arabic script, for example, addresses the part
of the public that is familiar with it. The reason that non-Latin scripts were hardly found may be that linguistic landscape actors comply with Spolsky & Cooper's (1991) presumed reader condition (‘Prefer to write signs in the language or languages that intended readers are assumed to read’), as the majority of the audience would not be able to decipher other scripts.

There is a strong relationship between names and identities, because a name is a symbol of identity. A name in a minority language can have much symbolic value. This (and other factors) may explain why there have been so many debates and conflicts about the issue of geographical names in the province of Friesland. The results of this study show that, in Amsterdam as well as in Friesland, there is a difference with regard to the languages used between signs displaying one or more proper names and signs displaying other text. Signs with only proper names are linguistically more diverse and more frequently include languages such as English, Frisian and Italian than signs with other text. This finding suggests that names such as shop and brand names are especially used as a display of identity.

### 6.4 Linguistic Landscape and Vitality

In this section, the investigated linguistic landscapes are related to issues of vitality. According to Landry & Bourhis (1997), the linguistic landscape is a marker of the vitality of ethnolinguistic groups in multilingual contexts. The present study shows that the linguistic landscape is not always a manifestation of the ethnolinguistic vitality of groups inhabiting a given area. On the one hand, languages that are not spoken by larger groups of inhabitants, but are used by foreign tourists or have high prestige in advertising also occur in the linguistic landscape. On the other hand, languages such as Berber with a weaker written tradition may be vital in an area, and still not be used in the linguistic landscape. Ethnolinguistic vitality certainly appears to have some explanatory power regarding the composition of linguistic landscapes, however. As noted in Chapter 3 to date there are only ethnolinguistic vitality data available for some languages in the Netherlands against which the findings of the linguistic landscape study can be assessed.

Languages often play several roles at the same time, which can be illustrated by English. In the Netherlands this language is used as the major international language, but also as the home language of many immigrants. If a sign in a shopping centre such as Ganzenpoort (in Amsterdam) features English, it is difficult to assess whether that English is used more as an international language or as an immigrant minority language, e.g. for Ghanese immigrants. In other words, the different roles
are difficult to tease apart. Consequently, it is not always clear to what extent the occurrence of a language in the linguistic landscape is revealing of ethnolinguistic vitality.

The vitality of an ethnolinguistic group declines during processes of assimilation with the dominant group. Lüdi (2007) links the results of his linguistic landscape study in the city of Basel — which is situated in the German-speaking part of Switzerland — to the integration of immigrants. He concludes that German is the lingua franca among speakers of other languages, and sees the substantial presence of German in signs produced by immigrants as proof of, but also as an instrument for, their integration into Swiss society. The present study indicates that in Amsterdam immigrant shop owners also often use the dominant language on their signs. This may likewise evidence their assimilation into Dutch society, because it shows their willingness and ability to write or order signs in the dominant language. As noted in Chapter 1, in the Dutch public opinion, immigrant minority languages such as Turkish and Arabic are considered obstacles to integration. Immigrant shop owners may well have internalised the high status attached to Dutch and the low status attached to immigrant languages in Dutch society. Using Dutch on signs may also be an instrument for assimilation, as it may attract customers from other ethnolinguistic groups.

6.5 Linguistic Landscape and Power

This section considers the relationship between the investigated linguistic landscapes and issues of power. In Chapter 1 it was noted that the public opinion on multilingualism in the Netherlands is ambivalent, in that some languages are seen as a resource whereas others are considered a problem. A similar division can be seen in the linguistic landscape. If one compares the occurrence of Turkish, probably the largest immigrant language in the Netherlands (Extra et al. 2002), to the occurrence of English, it becomes clear that the English language has much more presence in the linguistic landscape. Thus, the fact that English is valued more than Turkish is also expressed there.

Shohamy’s (2006) considerations, as conveyed in Chapter 2, show that the linguistic landscape may reaffirm power relations by marking who is dominant and who is not. The present study demonstrates that this was indeed the case in the survey areas. For example, all street signs in the sample were monolingual Dutch, regardless of the minority languages spoken in the Netherlands.
Ben-Rafael’s (2009) sociological framework captures power issues in the principle of power relations, which refer to the extent to which actors are able to impose patterns of behaviour on others. The fact that Dutch, the language of the dominant group, has a much stronger presence in the linguistic landscape than the languages of subordinate groups, may show that power relations play an important role. Although the government does not prescribe the use of Dutch on signs, public opinion sometimes condemns the use of other languages, especially immigrant minority languages. For example, election bills in Turkish in the city of Rotterdam caused a commotion in February 2010. The results of this study do indeed point to rather strong normative pressures to use the Dutch language, which leads to a rather low presence of minority languages and thus to limited multilingualism in the linguistic landscape. This is related to the marginal place that minority languages have in education, and to the emphasis the government puts on learning and using Dutch. Given the relatively small presence of languages other than Dutch and English, power relations and good reasons may be the major structuring principles in the Dutch context, although many other factors may have had an effect. Presentation of self and collective identity seem to impact on the linguistic landscape to a smaller degree.

6.6 Recommendations for Future Work

Coulmas (2009) states that linguistic landscaping is as old as writing. Ancient inscriptions show that people already left their traces thousands of years ago through texts in public space. The linguistic landscape is dynamic, as it is always under construction. This project examined the linguistic landscape synchronically. The idea to use the language on signs as a research subject is relatively new, and there are no systematic data available of the Dutch linguistic landscape in former times. However, it would be very interesting to see how it develops from now on. Will the process of globalisation continue to influence the linguistic landscape, so that English wins ground? Will the opposite process, regionalisation, promote the use of Frisian in Friesland? Will the languages of immigrants, for example from Turkey, Suriname or Morocco, be displayed more or less than they are now? And will Dutch and English become increasingly mixed, resulting in constructions like hair en beauty salon and koffiecorner (en and koffie meaning ‘and’ and ‘coffee’ respectively)? On the basis of this dissertation, it will be possible to replicate the study, for example ten years later, and compare the findings to the results in and around 2007. Such a comparison will provide answers to the above questions and
will shed light on the diachronic development of the linguistic landscape in a changing society. The explicit and detailed description of the methodology that was applied also makes it possible to replicate this study in another sociolinguistic context and compare the results.

In the course of this study, it became clear that many important background data about the multilingual situation in the Netherlands were lacking. It would be interesting to extend Extra et al.’s (2002) large-scale survey to Amsterdam because no data at all on the distribution and vitality of immigrant minority languages in the Dutch capital are available. Also, more information about the ethnolinguistic vitality of minority groups in the Netherlands would be welcome.

Knowledge about the linguistic landscape can be applied in education. In an ongoing Canadian research project, Dagenais et al. (2009) show how the linguistic landscape can be used in primary school to raise children’s awareness of language diversity. At the University of Amsterdam, where the present study was carried out, and likely at many other universities worldwide, students learn about multilingualism by photographing and analysing signs. From observations in the linguistic landscape, pupils and students can learn how language choice may be driven by power relations. Expanding the use of the linguistic landscape in education, as well as the development of teaching material, will also be an interesting step forward.

As Shohamy & Gorter (2009a: 9) point out in their introduction to the book *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*, “the feeling among researchers working in this area is that the work has only just begun”. This explorative study tries to contribute to the field by providing more insight into the relation between the linguistic landscape and the languages spoken in an area, and by identifying factors that influence properties of signs. The connection made between regional and immigrant minority languages as well as the detailed description of the methodology, which paid special attention to the classification of proper names, may help to further the study of the linguistic landscape.