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SPANISH IN LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES OF THE U.S.

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Introduction

As a baseline definition, Linguistic Landscape (henceforth LL) is any display of texts. LLs have been around for millennia. Hammurabi’s code of law was displayed on a stele for public view in Babylon about 3,770 years ago and graffiti was carved on exterior walls in Pompeii some 2,100 years ago. These texts were part of ancient LLs and have been scrutinized by historians for a long time to understand and depict the societies that created them. Other early publicly displayed texts such as the Rosetta Stone, a stele with a bilingual text in three different scripts displayed more than 2,200 years ago in Egypt, and the trilingual Behistun Inscription, a text carved some 2,500 years ago in current Iran, have been of special interest to philologists and linguists. The former inscription was the key to decrypting Egyptian hieroglyphs and the latter to deciphering cuneiform script. In both cases, it was the presence of more than one language that made them especially noteworthy to scholars.

The coexistence of different languages has long been commonplace in LLs and is one of the leading reasons behind the establishment of LL as a field of study. The first studies strictly on LL identified the presence of different languages on outdoor signage in the 1970s. However, the term LL was not coined until the publication of a seminal work by Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 23): “Linguistic Landscape refers to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region.” The authors also pioneered a different method of LL analysis. Instead of examining the LL itself, they analyzed students’ responses to questionnaires and tests where LL was the key variable in order to gauge the correlation between LL and ethnolinguistic vitality.

Shortly after Landry and Bourhis’ article, LL studies surged with an intense activity that is sustained to this day. Research has been conducted in more than 60 countries and has produced some 300 publications. The most recent collective publications on LL include five monographs and a sizable number of articles. A series of international workshops have been held yearly since 2008 (save 2011) and Linguistic Landscape, An International Journal was founded in 2015. Having language and society as common ground, this intense scholarly activity has yielded two major approaches to the object of study (Franco Rodríguez, 2011, pp. 71–72). One approach is qualitative, using mainly interviews and surveys with only anecdotal fieldwork data from the actual LL, if any. This group of studies concentrates largely on social attitudes towards the incidence
of a language in a particular LL and the impact of language policies in the LL. Although there is no clear-cut distinction, some studies measure the effect of LL on people’s perception of a language and a linguistic community while others analyze the social effect of the current legal framework that regulates the LL.

The other approach is primarily grounded in fieldwork information taken from the LL and its community members. At first, this type of research was mostly based on quantitative data, but the incorporation of qualitative data has progressively intensified. The analysis is also increasingly multimodal and combines other elements beyond language such as people, sounds, images, symbols, video, type of physical support, authorship, location, function, text’s shape and arrangement, font type, size and color, space-time configuration, and history of text. The majority of these studies examine LLs of two or more linguistic communities in contact and/or the presence of immigrant, minority, and global languages (mostly English) in LLs. In addition, various often intertwined foci have been developed including ethnic identity, inter-ethnic relationships, language vitality, effect of language policies, multilingualism, impact of immigration, minority languages, literacy, market value of languages, economy, politics, ideology, history, globalization, and social change.

Researchers have used the term LL mainly to refer to language displayed on public streets. This is why LL is commonly equated with visible writing in the public domain. A closer look into the term justifies this tendency. “Landscape” denotes an expanse of scenery that can be seen in a single view and “linguistic” states the presence of language as its focal quality. That is, LLs display language that is visible (or perceptible) to others. The scope of the LL is defined by the observer, whose “single view” may comprise a wide range of physical settings (e.g. a wall, a street, a neighborhood, a city, etc.). The term LL has been consolidated and generally accepted among scholars, but the growing body of literature on LL challenges the term’s ability to capture the actual object of study. Two main issues have arisen as researchers define and expand the scope of LL studies. On the one hand, the bulk of the investigations deal with multilingual texts displayed in cities. As a result, some have suggested “linguistic cityscape” or “multilingual cityscape” as more appropriate terms. These proposals, however, have yet to gain momentum and face a shortcoming similar to LL. In effect, the suggested terms could be inadequate and more restrictive than LL if they are applied to current and potential studies unrelated to the city setting. On the other hand, what is considered LL is stretching beyond the concept of publicly visible written language in the streets. Some LL studies propose or include elements such as oral texts, texts in interior spaces, texts in cyberspace, images, symbols, and people. Most of these elements are included in the baseline definition of LL (i.e. any display of texts), but the issue is to determine if non-textual elements can be considered LL on their own. Arguably, a thinkable LL without language or an LL where language is not the focus, but rather another means to interpret or construe spaces, would be better labeled as (geo)semiotic landscape.

Spanish in the LLs of the U.S. is particularly relevant to the understanding of Spanish in this country for two main reasons. First, Spanish competes with English in the LL with an apparent disadvantage. Spanish is often associated with the language of immigrants from developing countries, while English is not only the de facto official language in the U.S., but the de facto language for global communication, visible in LLs around the world. Not surprisingly, the status of Spanish in the U.S. is mainly that of a subordinate code (see Potowski, this volume). In LLs of the U.S., the use of languages is scarcely regulated even at the local level and the preservation of Spanish as a heritage language is not endorsed by language policies. In this context, the presence of Spanish in the LL springs, not solely but frequently, from local entities and, as such, the LL becomes an expression of the language’s status, public relevance, and functionality.
in the selected area. Second, LLs are subject to less publishing scrutiny than other written modalities and often favor the language that best relates to their potential readers. Vernacular conventions are thus often prioritized over academic guidelines, and linguistic traits of Spanish in the U.S. are expected to surface in LL texts. These circumstances make the Spanish displayed in LLs of the U.S. a unique source of sociolinguistic material not only to provide a descriptive account of Spanish, but also to assess its societal function, utility, and status, and to contribute to prospective language policies that regulate or promote Spanish as a heritage language in the public domain.

Critical issues and topics

LL studies is a developing field with a methodological approach that is gaining consensus, but because it is still in the making, some core issues are currently being discussed by LL researchers: (a) LL authorship and actor, (b) definition of the unit of analysis, and (c) interpretation of quantitative data as ethnolinguistic vitality. I will briefly present summaries of these three issues before discussing Spanish LL in the U.S.

Authorship and actor

Most LL studies that offer quantitative data aim to measure public vitality and status in terms of language visibility. Thus, the occurrence of a language is gauged by the number of units of analysis that contain that language. While this approach is useful to illustrate the social utility of a language in the LL, some questions arise regarding the accuracy of this type of analysis. For example, some researchers have attributed the complexity of linking linguistic traits and LL authorship to the often presumable polygenetic composition of LL texts. How many people have participated in the whole process of composing the current text? Who are those people? Why did they choose those words and language(s)? Who decided the arrangement of the text, the number of signs, the type of signs, etc? Only a few scholars have addressed these questions, and they have obtained different results that range from the owner’s full control of the text to shared decisions between the owner and the signage/advertising company.

The most critical issues are, first, to differentiate between authorship and actor (i.e. the entity most reasonably associated to the text) and, second, how to determine who the actor is and what linguistic material this actor produces. This distinction is useful, for instance, to decide how much of the writing is private, institutional, or corporate; to differentiate between the use of English by locals and corporations; to report on who uses the different languages and how; and to specify the source of linguistic variations. A reliable LL analysis should associate every text to a single actor. The same actor may display many texts (different or not) in different parts of the LL, but that actor should be tallied once. That is, LL authorship is relevant for understanding the creation process and origin of LL material. However, authorship is arguably not essential in ascribing a text to a given actor. The specific persons who generate a text are not as significant as the type of entity (actor) that is associated to it and likely behind its composition. For instance, the presence of a minority language in the LL may be interpreted differently depending on the type of actor who displays it. Thus, researchers must seek evidence to determine if the actor is an international corporation, a local business, a governmental office, or an individual, regardless of the actual people behind the making of the text. There are LL texts whose authorship is very challenging to determine, but not so challenging to link them to an actor. For example, the authors of anonymous personal messages and graffiti may not be easily tracked down, but the actors can be classified as private, since they are not corporations or institutions.
Many studies differentiate between top-down (institutional) and bottom-up (private) texts to determine the force that promotes a language or a linguistic model, but fail to specify how many actors are producing those texts. A language can have significant visibility if it is displayed in many texts, but this visibility may not equate to language vitality if there is a substantial discrepancy between the number of texts and the number of actors that produce those texts. For instance, a corporation or a state agency can inundate an LL with texts containing a given language, which may indicate the language’s institutional support or market value, but may not reflect the community’s active use of that language. A more productive classification of actors differentiates between private for individuals or small businesses; corporate for corporations, chains, or non-public organizations; and institutional for public institutions, centers, or organizations. In addition, actors are also classified as local if they originate from and have a presence in the city; regional if they are also present in other places within the region; national if they are present in areas beyond the region; and international if they have an international presence or self-identify as foreigners.

Definition of the unit of analysis

One of the main challenges of producing reliable quantitative LL data is to clearly define a distinct unit of analysis. The various approaches to the notion of LL have generated different descriptions and labels for the unit of analysis. Moreover, these descriptions are being challenged by the complexity of the LL. This is the case of the two most followed methodological models: Backhaus (2006, p. 55), who uses the term “sign” and defines it as “any piece of text within a spatially definable frame”; and Cenoz and Gorter (2006, p. 71), who explain that “each establishment but not each sign was the unit of analysis.” The emphasis on the physical display in these definitions reasonably and easily evokes the commonly used term “sign.” However, it may not be enough to produce accurate quantitative analysis of LLs, as illustrated in the two scenarios below.

In scenario 1, three stores display information with adhesive letters on their storefront glass doors, but the opening hours are presented differently in each of them. Store A uses the same adhesive letters with the times in English and Spanish; store B uses one piece of paper with the times in English and Spanish; and store C uses two small signs, one in English and the other in Spanish. Following Backhaus’ definition, the number of units is different for each store, despite the fact that the only major difference is the physical support. Following Cenoz and Gorter’s definition, each store counts as one single unit. In scenario 2, a clothing store that is part of a local chain in Spain uses Spanish to display the names of products in its store window, but also displays two pieces of information unrelated to clothing. One is a paper that advertises a room for rent and includes a Latin American dialectal term. The other is a sign from a credit card company that includes an English loanword. Backhaus would count three units and Cenoz and Gorter would record a single unit, even though some texts are not related to the establishment.

Having the physical support as the main criterion to define the unit of analysis, even when the support is associated to an establishment, proves to be insufficient to consistently quantify languages in LLs. This is because physical support provides valuable visual information for an initial approach to the unit of analysis, but a comprehensive characterization needs to determine the relationship between content, actor, and support. It is essential to establish the correlation between the actor and the content of the text, which can be subsequently used to determine the physical boundaries of the unit of analysis. Thus, a more suitable term would be “LL text” (or just “text”) as defined by Franco Rodríguez (2013, p. 112): “Any piece(s) of writing composed by the same actor with a focal content related to that actor and displayed on a
circumscribed space in the public domain.” Following this definition, all content in each store of scenario 1 is composed by one actor who displays two languages, thus one text for each store’s glass door is counted; however, there is evidence that scenario 2 texts have been composed by three different actors, thus three texts in the store window are tallied and the use of English and the Spanish regionalism are associated to different actors. These examples illustrate the importance of a well-defined unit of analysis to consistently determine the public visibility of a language and the actor behind it.

**Interpretation of quantitative data as ethnolinguistic vitality**

Ethnolinguistic vitality refers to an ethnic group and its language’s social presence and status. Social presence includes demographic data and occurrence in media and LL. Social status comprises their influence on and representation in institutions and the economy. Although a language’s visibility in the LL can be an indicator of ethnolinguistic status, a number of studies reveal that this visibility does not necessarily correlate with the language’s vitality or its speakers’ vitality in a given area. An ethnolinguistic group can be absent or have low presence in society, but have a proportionally high language visibility. For instance, English can be ubiquitous in an LL where there are very few native English speakers, owing to its role as a global language. Alternatively, a minority language may be barely represented in the LL despite the large concentration of speakers due to the ethnolinguistic group’s low literacy rate, as is the case of Navajo.

Nevertheless, the apparent lack of direct correlation between visibility and vitality should not overshadow the implications of representing or silencing an ethnolinguistic group in the LL. Visibility can still be a valuable tool to assess vitality. The challenge is to improve both data collection and data analysis for more reliable interpretations of findings. Quantitatively speaking, more solid contrasts and conclusions could be yielded if LL studies incorporate a multivariate analysis of the following variables. First, the number of texts is often used to measure language visibility, but this visibility may not reflect linguistic vitality accurately unless the analysis distinguishes between the total number of texts and the total number of different texts, since repeated texts would be tallied as different texts. In addition, if some types of texts (e.g. graffiti, moving texts, small print, etc.) are omitted for methodological reasons, the impact of omitting them can be minimized in contrastive analyses if the studies include a detailed account of the exceptions. Second, it may be inaccurate to claim robust vitality of a given language that is visible in a significant number of texts when these texts contain few words or few different words in that language. A thorough analysis needs to include the number of words, different words, and the distribution of words. Third, LL studies created to measure the presence of minority languages or global languages generally fail to report on the contexts in which they are used. Thus, stating high vitality for a significantly visible language may be inaccurate if this language is only used in one or two areas of activity/life. The use of languages needs to be categorized into domains (e.g. health care, education, real estate, etc.). The more domains in which a language is displayed, the higher public utility can be assigned to that language. Last, language can be displayed in the main section, the most prominent part of a text with larger print in a top, left, or central position, or in the informative section, a subordinate location with smaller print in a bottom, right, or marginal position that commonly complements the main section. A complete analysis needs to differentiate between these two sections. The presence of a language in both sections attests to its symbolic value and social utility, which can be interpreted as linguistic vitality.
Research on Spanish in LLs of the U.S.

References to Spanish in the LL can be found in some studies around the world that focus on other languages, or those that describe multilingual LLs in countries where Spanish is not an official language. But much of the research strictly on LLs in Spanish-speaking areas has been conducted in Spain. Catalan and Spanish were already examined by the end of the 1990s to describe language use within the bilingual autonomous region of Catalonia. This interest has continued to yield further research about the impact of language policies on the visibility of co-official languages in Spain, namely the Basque Country, Catalonia, Galicia, and Valencia. Other studies have focused on minority languages and multilingual LLs as a result of immigration and globalization in some Spanish cities, including Almeria, Barcelona, Madrid, Malaga, Mallorca, and Seville. Bibliographical reviews have been offered by Franco Rodríguez (2011), Pons Rodríguez (2012), and Castillo Lluch and Sáez Rivera (2013).

Beyond Spain, there are few contributions on other LLs in Spanish-speaking countries. These are concentrated in Mexico and include topics such as the use of Oaxaca’s LL as a pedagogical tool in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (Sayer, 2010), the occurrence of English and Yucatec Maya in business names (Pfeiler et al., 1990), the presence of English in Mexican shop names in Monterrey as part of the overall incidence of English in Mexican commerce (Baumgardner, 2006), and the impact of English in Mexico City and Monterrey’s LLs in a broader analysis of the influence of English on Mexican Spanish (Baumgardner, 2011). On the Texas-Mexico border, Martínez (2003) examines the city of Reynosa, describing the presence of English loanwords and English-influenced grammatical innovation visible in commercial signage. The studies of Spanish in LLs of the U.S. have precisely in this study an antecedent to the type of LL displayed in densely Latino areas of the southwest.

The currently growing body of literature on LLs of the U.S. concentrates on areas with minority/heritage speakers of Asian languages (Chinese and Korean), Navajo, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. As an illustrative example of the increasing interest in Spanish, the 7th International Linguistic Landscape Workshop in 2015 included 11 papers that addressed the presence of Spanish in the LL, 7 of which were LLs of the U.S. in a wide range of settings (i.e. streets, museums, schools, online, and multimodal environments). The published studies that focus exclusively on Spanish-speaking areas in the U.S. are still few and heterogeneous, but clearly reveal LL’s potential to gauge the public status of Spanish as a minority/heritage language in the U.S. In this section, I will review 17 studies of Spanish LLs in the U.S., which as a whole suggest the apparent social value of Spanish in the LL as both a functional minority language and a conspicuous heritage symbol. This value is impacted by two contrasting forces. On the one hand, it is weakened by ideological and economic factors, which cause a disproportionately low visibility of Spanish, a preference for English and bilingual texts, and negative attitudes towards Spanish and its speakers. On the other, it is boosted by thriving ethnolinguistic vitality, which contributes to higher visibility of Spanish and its cultural heritage, greater language maintenance, and positive attitudes towards the language and Hispanics.

The public utility of Spanish as the language of the community has been described by some authors. Berry (2004) used the term “business-scapes” to describe the LL produced by Latino businesses in Reno, Nevada, and surveyed 19 Hispanic-owned businesses. The author provided examples to illustrate the growing visibility of LL items associated with Latinos as marketing strategies: Spanish and bilingual signage, colors of national flags, maps, regional decorations, interior murals, and typical products. The author conducted a survey on family-owned Hispanic businesses and reported that their commercial activity covered a wide range of domains, their customers were mostly from the community, and Spanish was the customary language in
business transactions. In a series of articles, Franco Rodríguez (2005, 2007, 2008) provided an evolving linguistic description of the Spanish displayed in the LL of predominantly Hispanic areas in Los Angeles and Miami-Dade counties. These studies showed how Spanish in these LLs mirrors the linguistic traits of the counties’ Spanish-speaking communities. This correlation was supported by three arguments: first, signage companies’ responses to surveys indicated no interference on the language displayed in texts; second, a quantitative analysis of the actors by type revealed that Spanish stems mostly from individuals or small businesses; and third, a comparison with other studies on Spanish in those areas validated LL text analysis in recognizing vernacular linguistic patterns. The 2008 contribution presented a systematic analysis of the LL and applied it to Los Angeles and Miami-Dade’s LLs. This analysis aimed to gauge linguistic vitality in terms of visibility and utility. Visibility was measured by the total number of texts and text placement. Utility was measured by quantifying the number of different texts, total number of words and different words, words by category, the domains of use per actor (institutional, corporate, and private), as well as the informative and symbolic functions of Spanish and English. The results revealed the communities’ bilingual condition. Spanish was amply used for practical and symbolic purposes, but the most prominent part of the text was primarily in English or bilingual, and the informative section was also mainly bilingual. English had a greater linguistic imprint in Los Angeles county’s LL, but did not mix with Spanish as much in Miami-Dade’s LL, which correlated to Latino’s higher level of education in this county.

Benedict and Kent (2004) conducted a longitudinal field survey in an area of Cleveland, Ohio, to analyze the correlation between Latinos’ demographic vitality and the incidence of “semi-fixed landscape elements.” Over a period of six years, they examined signage in commercial areas and churches and other items such as house colors, distinctive Hispanic decorations, and national symbols in residential areas. The results showed a correspondence between high Latino population’s density and a greater proportion of LL items associated to Hispanics, in particular Spanish and bilingual signage. However, in other studies, the visibility of Spanish has been described as disproportionately low in relation to the size of the Hispanic population in the area. Troyer et al. (2015) combined quantitative and qualitative data analysis to examine a small town’s LL in Oregon, where one-third of its population were Spanish speakers. Quantitative examination included language choice by domain and by type of actor in relation to the number of actors, signs, and different signs. This analysis revealed that Spanish had low visibility proportionate to the percentage of the Spanish-speaking population, was visible in very few domains, and was displayed mostly by local and national businesses. Authorities at all levels employed only English, with the exception of two local texts that used Spanish to discourage illegal behavior. Qualitative analysis elicited ethnolinguistic perceptions from diverse community members: a city official and seven people who represented businesses that displayed either only English, only Spanish, or both languages. Interviewees exposed two causes that seemed to inhibit the use of written Spanish by locals in this LL: Anglo-Americans’ fear of social change fed by the Latino population’s rapid growth, and Hispanics’ fear of prejudices fed by negative immigration discourses.

Some LL studies claim that the salience of Spanish in LLs within areas of dense Hispanic population is offset by an expanding English-centered ideological environment. Barker et al. (2001) discussed the impact of the English-only movement on minority languages like Spanish and on perceptions of language vitality. They argued that high visibility of Spanish in the LL could be identified in this context as a threat to the hegemony of English and therefore end up actually being detrimental to Spanish. Later, Barker and Giles (2002) conducted phone interviews to examine Anglo-Americans’ perceptions of their own community and of the Hispanic community’s vitality in Santa Barbara, California. They found that their perceptions of increasing
Spanish in linguistic landscapes of U.S. 

Latino vitality and visibility in the LL correlated with greater support of English-only policies. Hult (2014) examined the Texan LL of San Antonio’s highway system by establishing the connection between 1) quantitative analysis or the presence of a language in the LL; 2) nexus analysis or language ideology, social status, and public function; and 3) geosemiotic analysis or language placement on the physical support, content expressed in that language, and other visual elements. The specified focus was advertising and commercial signage at the local level. The results showed that the vast majority of this LL consisted of monolingual English signs, which the author considered a reflection of the English-dominant language ideology (i.e. educational policies and language activism), not the actual city’s bilingual makeup. Hult further analyzed the presence of Spanish on three non-local signs connected to an international corporation, a national corporation, and a state agency. These signs depicted Spanish in this LL as a marginalized language that was associated with the working class and hardly recognized as the local communities’ functional code.

A similar negative view is portrayed by Martínez (2014), who scrutinized Spanish-speaking youth’s perceptions of LLs displayed within a wide variety of health care facilities in Hidalgo County, Texas. He used an innovative approach in LL studies called photovoice methodology, which consisted of three steps. First, members of the community took pictures to capture evidence of a given issue. Second, those pictures were presented in community meetings to discuss any needs for action. And third, the outcomes of the discussion were communicated to the appropriate institution so that action was taken based on the narratives presented. This study was mostly qualitative, but some quantification was carried out: code preference (i.e. more English than Spanish), error analysis (i.e. many more in Spanish than in English), physical support (i.e. three times more makeshift signage in Spanish), and content (i.e. more information about health in English and more procedural/instructional and regulatory in Spanish). Study participants perceived a message of contempt towards Spanish-speakers and expressed disapproval of this LL. They felt that Spanish speakers were not as appreciated as English speakers. The author argued that the LL reflected the subordination of Spanish in an English-dominant environment, which was a result of the evident unbalanced power relations between the two ethnolinguistic groups.

Such English-only policies, however, seem to more greatly impact institutions and non-local texts. Yanguas (2009) examined the public language use of English, Spanish, or both in the LLs of two Washington, DC Hispanic neighborhoods in relation to two other factors: language ideology (i.e. institutional support and community beliefs) and language management (i.e. language policies and local choices). In light of an expanding official-English ideology, the author underscored the relevance of this type of analysis to demonstrate how practices at the local level differed, or not, from practices at the state and federal levels, as well as to determine how much and for what purpose a language was used in a community. Some examples were provided to illustrate, first, how this LL evidenced the public usefulness and vitality of Spanish in the area and, second, the apparent conflict between local actors’ beliefs and DC’s English-centered standpoint. While local actors supported bilingual practices, DC endorsed a de facto language policy that disregarded the community’s linguistic reality by using only English in the LL. The author concluded that English-centered ideology was showcased in the LL and therefore affected Hispanics and non-Hispanics’ language attitudes alike. Similar conclusions can be found in the comparison made by Franco Rodríguez (2013, pp. 127–129) between the LL of Almería, Spain, and Los Angeles and Miami-Dade counties. This comparison indicated a slightly higher incidence of English in those two counties, where English was used by many more local actors. The reported data shows that Spanish was actually utilized by significantly fewer corporations and public institutions. This finding suggests that Spanish, despite its public utility, enjoyed less institutional support and market value in these two counties than in the officially monolingual city of Almería.
Other authors have examined the impact of Spanish in the LL on attitudes towards Spanish and Hispanics. Mitchell (2010) compared attitudes towards Hispanics’ vitality with their actual occurrence in the LL of a Hispanic neighborhood in Pittsburgh. The author discussed a newspaper article that expressed “fear” of the growing Latino presence in the neighborhood, despite being less than 5% of the population. One of the possible reasons given for this mistaken perception is how people experience a “semiotic landscape” or an LL that includes both visual and oral elements (even smells). Since all institutional signs were in English, Mitchell focused on private texts and quantified businesses, signs, languages in signs, and languages heard. The results showed a proportionally lower percentage of Spanish texts than Latino residents, and a balance between English and Spanish displayed on Hispanic businesses. However, the misperception of high Latino incidence in this LL could be explained by non-written phenomena: the clustering of a few Hispanic businesses and the high percentage of spoken Spanish in the selected area.

Some reasons for those negative attitudes have been explained by Benedict and Kent (2004). Their study reinforced four relevant issues for LL studies: even a very low number of LL items can create a perception of an ethnic neighborhood; results may be different in areas with a higher percentage of more acculturated second- and third-generation Latinos; English is the overall most salient language regardless of demographics; and better understanding of LLs can be gained by combining field surveys with interviews about the motivations behind displaying LL items. But the impact of the LL on attitudes is not always negative. Barker and Giles (2002) found out that, contrary to their expectations, less contact with Spanish in the LL was linked to a greater support for English-only policies. The authors presumed, though, that results would be reversed if they included change as a factor by asking about perceptions regarding a future LL with more Spanish. Dailey et al. (2005) analyzed high school students’ attitudes towards Anglo- and Hispanic-accented speakers of English and towards the LL in a broader sense (i.e. 28 oral and written language items indoors, outdoors, and in the media). The multivariate analysis revealed that Anglos’ contact with English or Spanish in the LL did not affect their perceptions of either type of speaker; however, in the case of Latinos, the higher their exposure to English the more favorably they rated Anglo speakers and, conversely, the higher their exposure to Spanish the less favorably. A greater exposure to Spanish attenuated favoring Anglos’ traits over those of Hispanics, which led the authors to infer a potential correlation between Spanish in LL, attitudes, and language maintenance. Finally, participants in the study conducted by Troyer et al. (2015) offered some examples of how the LL can be an asset for ethnolinguistically diverse communities. In their opinion, Spanish and Latinos in the LL enrich the local cultural environment, exposure to Spanish and Hispanics increase tolerance, and authority’s LL awareness can promote more thoughtful, integrative LL policies.

While language policies to promote Spanish in LLs of the U.S. are still to be developed, some authors have described Spanish in the LL as a means for and evidence of language maintenance and heritage preservation. Franco Rodríguez (2011) contrasted data from Los Angeles and Miami-Dade counties’ LLs with their sociocultural context. Although Spanish was negatively affected by education policies, generational language attrition, lower social status, and official-English movements, contextualized LL data analysis revealed the persistent maintenance of Spanish as a dynamic minority language in these counties. Seals (2012) examined the LL created by a demonstration in Washington, DC. Although Spanish or Hispanics were not the focus of this study, both became a major part of the analysis. Both were examined in an uncommonly studied setting, a transient LL, and from a multimodal perspective that included writing, flags, people, and videos. The results illustrated the Hispanics’ bilingual makeup and their high visibility as an ethnolinguistic group. García et al. (2013) studied two murals and the surrounding signs displayed in the largely Hispanic neighborhood of East Harlem in Upper
Manhattan, New York City. These murals were characterized as contestation tools that the Latino community used to express the condition of a struggling ethno-cultural conglomerate, something they could not fully convey in English or Spanish. The authors argued that English-centered education and low Spanish literacy in this area cornered Spanish to the oral domain. Unsurprisingly, English was the most visible language and the only one used by institutions in the LL. Some bilingual and Spanish texts were displayed by businesses as a marketing tool. There was limited Spanish, but this research presented two indicators of linguistic endurance in the LL: the Spanish used by the community for social activism, and the apparent link between Spanish revitalization and local gentrification afoot.

Recommendations and future directions

LL studies provide a unique angle through which to examine Spanish in the U.S. due to the complexity of the object of study. The LL is a collective text in which numerous actors converge and participate along with other elements such as languages, spaces, sounds, speech, smells, images, symbols, objects, people, ideologies, interests, and beliefs. For this reason, future analyses of Spanish in LLs of the U.S. should be increasingly more comprehensive: multilayered, multivariate, multimodal, quantitative and qualitative, synchronic and diachronic, comparative, and anchored in shared solid methods.

As more comprehensive studies develop, more conclusive answers will be provided to the issues presented in the previous section. Studies on Spanish in the LLs of the U.S. reveal a discrepancy between the high concentration of Hispanics and the low visibility of Spanish in the LL, especially in texts. The main reason suggested behind this phenomenon is the subordinate status of Spanish in an increasingly English-centered environment. This may be the case, but further research is needed. Data on language should specify the number of Spanish speakers, their oral proficiency, domains of language use, and their literacy in Spanish and English. Second- and third-generation heritage speakers may use some Spanish at home, but have limited knowledge of and formal exposure to it, especially when Hispanic youth have been educated in the U.S. and speak English well. Oral interviews and surveys distributed to Hispanic local actors who display English could provide additional information on this issue. English might be the code they know best, the potential customers’ code, or a plausible step in the acculturation process.

In addition, quantitative data on institutional texts used to assess official support of Spanish must be interpreted in light of relevant demographic data. Comparative analyses could determine whether or not Spanish has less social recognition in areas that experience a sudden Hispanic influx than in areas considered traditional Latino enclaves. This hypothesis would shed light on why the initial and sole institutional support of Spanish would occur at the local level in newly formed Hispanic communities. Spanish is likely to first have the pragmatic backing of local officials who are in direct contact with the ethnolinguistic reality. Interviews could provide useful insights on local agencies’ use of Spanish, but also on determining when and why state and federal agencies opt to use Spanish in the LL.

This apparent slow or absent institutional reaction to a Latino community’s ethnolinguistic makeup contrasts with the corporations’ promptness, whose alacrity can be explained by their interest in the commodification of languages to generate profit (Leeman & Modan, 2009). Yet a detailed account of the corporate and local businesses that display Spanish, how much, and the reasons behind their use of Spanish can reveal significant information about the language’s economic value, which can be interpreted as ethnolinguistic vitality. Future studies can attempt to connect linguistic landscapes to other theoretical work, such as the interaction between the organization of urban space and the political economy (Harvey, 2009).
Last but not least, LL studies in the U.S. present two highly worthwhile applications. One is their potential role in the teaching about Spanish and Latinos in the U.S. LL research findings could be incorporated in courses that cover aspects such as current widespread vernacular traits, the vitality of Spanish and Hispanics as a minority ethnolinguistic group, the impact of English as a global and majority language, and diachronic sociocultural changes in Hispanic communities. The other application is the suitable use of LL studies to inform and influence language policies that foster both Spanish visibility in the LL and ethnolinguistic awareness. This application will benefit from interviews that assess perceptions and attitudes and from the photovoice methodology described earlier, both of which can raise LL consciousness among community members and policymakers. Further and more comprehensive research will be essential to validate current findings and build a case for the promotion of Spanish in the LL. The main findings to confirm are those that elicit Hispanics’ feelings of contempt: scarce presence of institutional texts with Spanish, content that is mainly regulatory and prohibitive, and poorly written texts that are flooded with errors and do not convey the right meaning or are incomprehensible. Thus, this type of LL studies becomes a means of language activism.

Further reading


References


