

A Variationist Linguistic Landscape Study of English language use in Viennese public space

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This contribution reports on a large-scale project that applies state-of-the-art variationist sociolinguistic methodology to quantitative linguistic landscape (LL) study on an unprecedented level of consistency and rigor (cf. Soukup 2016, 2020). Study context is the investigation of written English vs. German language use in the public space of Vienna, Austria. Data collection adhered to two central variationist tenets: (I) the ‘count-all’ Principle of Accountability (Labov 1969); applied via (II) hypothesis-driven stratified sampling (Sankoff 2005). Regarding (I), because the dependent variable under investigation is written language choice (English vs. German), all stationary items (signs, objects, displays) bearing any identifiable written text (=all possible places of occurrence of language choice) were recorded. Regarding (II), data collection covered a survey area operationalizing three main hypotheses about LL items catering to local audiences in Vienna: (1) AGE – predicting a higher presence of English in areas where many young adults, vs. seniors, live; (2) MULTILINGUALISM (more English where more people of different linguistic backgrounds come together), regarding (2a) RESIDENTS, as well as (2b) TOURISTS; and (3) COMMERCIALISM (more English in shopping vs. residential areas, due to its strong association with global consumerism and commerce). To implement these hypotheses, 3x2 Viennese administrative districts (‘Gemeindebezirke’) were selected (matching districts that load very high or very low on the parameters from hypotheses 1, 2a, and 2b), and within each district, one shopping street and one residential street (hypothesis 3). On each street, a 200m-stretch centering on the lengthwise midpoint was surveyed under the count-all principle, yielding 17,091 datapoints.

For data analysis, a generalized linear model was constructed featuring English language use as dependent variable, and AGE, MULTILINGUALISM, TOURISM, and COMMERCIALISM as primary predictor variables. A multimodel-inferencing approach (Burnham & Anderson 2002) based on a set of candidate models was chosen to compute (a) the relative variable importance of the predictors in all candidate models and (b) statistical significance and effect sizes of all predictors in the averaged model. An additional generalized linear model together with hierarchical clustering was employed to assess the effects of and the relationships amongst a set of secondary variables regarding the recorded LL items, including their MATERIALITY (e.g.

enamel or wood); text APPLICATION method (e.g. printed or handwritten); SIZE; physical LOCATION (e.g. on a wall or on street furniture); PLACEMENT type (legal or illegal); and ACTIVITY context (e.g. shop sign vs. traffic sign).

Findings show that among the primary predictors, TOURISM and MULTILINGUALISM have the strongest impact on language use, such that TOURISM promotes English usage, and MULTILINGUALISM actually inhibits it (suggesting the local ‘lingua franca’ to be German).

Overall, however, the item-related (‘secondary’) variables are more relevant than the areal-level (‘primary’) variables, such that e.g. the activity context of public administration disfavors English use, while the arts as well as food/accommodation industries enhance it; and small items are more likely to contain English than large ones.

This contribution discusses in detail the study’s methodological setup, innovations, and statistical analyses, as well as general implications for variationist LL research.

References:

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