

JAKOB R. E. LEIMGRUBER (FREIBURG IM BREISGAU)

Montreal's linguistic landscape: instances of top-down and bottom-up language planning

Summary

In Montreal, federal bilingualism, provincial monolingualism, and municipal realities of widespread bilingualism have all left a deep impression on the linguistic landscape of the city. Legislation of the languages on public signs was enacted in 1977, with a view to unambiguously project a *visage français* (Levine 1989) of Montreal, a projection aimed, in no small part, to immigrants considering which language to shift toward. Initially requiring all outdoor signage to be monolingually French, the Charter of the French language now mandates French to be present and «markedly predominant» if accompanied by other languages. Top-down legislation regulating the linguistic landscape (LL) comes from both provincial and federal sources. However, bottom-up (Ben-Rafael et al 2006) policies embraced by a variety of stakeholders (community groups, individual businesses, private persons) also leave visible traces in the LL, and the way languages are used in these manifestations interacts in interesting ways with the legislation. Considering language choices in the LL emanating from the «grassroots», and bearing in mind that these may have the potential to redress power inequalities (Tollefson 2013), this chapter presents examples found in Montreal's LL that give visibility to the city's multiple languages, thus claiming their legitimacy. The resulting LL, notwithstanding the huge diversity of languages and the important mediating role of English, remains, for the most part, «markedly predominantly» French.

Keywords

Montreal; language policy; top-down and bottom-up policies; bilingual signage

1 Introduction

The language policies in place in Quebec are well known. The city of Montreal, which shall be the focus of this chapter, sits within a three-tiered language policy framework: a first level is that of federal legislation, which requires that institutions of the federal government operate in both official

languages, English and French. This is a constitutional principle that applies in all provinces, from coast to coast. A second level is that of the province, where language legislation, in the case of Quebec, takes the primary form of the Charter of the French language (often known as «Bill 101»), which mandates French as the sole official language of the province. A third tier, that of the municipal level, exists within Quebec; here the Charter grants municipalities the option of being officially bilingual in both French and English, provided a majority of its population had English as its mother tongue at the time of the passing of the Charter. The city of Montreal does not fulfil this criterion, and has, therefore, only French as its official language – in contrast to other municipalities on the Island of Montreal, which may be officially bilingual, particularly the western suburbs of the city.

Quite apart from the language policies in place, the city and the island of Montreal are home to a large number of very diverse languages: French is, of course, a widely-spoken language (73%¹ have it as their first official language spoken), but so is English, which is the first official language spoken by around 20%. Additionally, no less than 13% use a language other than French or English at home. Montreal, then, is unusual in the Quebec context in that it features such a high level of English use, with 61% of its residents declaring some kind of knowledge in the language. In terms of the presence of immigrant languages, the city can be usefully compared to other Canadian and North American metropolises.

The presence, in Montreal, of both a large English-speaking population and a large Allophone population features as a prominent backdrop to governmental language policies. Increasing the status of French in order to make it competitive with English, and therefore attractive to Francophone Quebecers themselves, was a first aim in the early stages of the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s–70s. This ensured that it was seen as normal for Francophones not to be required to speak any language other than French in order to climb the social ladder. Almost simultaneously, Canada (and therefore Quebec) being a country shaped by immigration, immigrants' language choices became an important focus. To this day, it is seen as crucial that immigrants who arrive in Quebec are faced unmistakably with French as the language towards which they should orient themselves. Being given a choice between French or English is considered detrimental to the survival of French and

¹ All figures in this paragraph are from the 2011 Census (<www.statcan.gc.ca>).

to the evolution of the demolinguistics of places like Montreal, where most immigration into Quebec takes place.

Efforts at channelling immigrants' language choices towards French are two-fold, with a combination of what one might term «hard» and «soft» approaches. First there is the «hard» approach of essentially barring non-Canadians from the English-language state school system: The Charter of the French language restricts access to the English system to children of a least one parent who is a Canadian citizen and who has received English education in Canada. This rule is effective in ensuring that the majority of new arrivals in the province converge towards the French language, including native English speakers from countries such as the USA or the UK (provided they choose the state school system and do not enrol their children in private schools, where language-based admission is free). On the other hand, there are the «soft» approaches, which do not have a direct influence on people's choices, but rather surround them on a daily basis: among them is the legislation regarding the linguistic landscape, to which I shall now turn.

2 Linguistic landscapes

The linguistic landscape (LL) is defined by Landry & Bourhis (1997: 25) 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». In the twenty years since this first definition of the Montreal-based pair of scholars, others have offered alternative definitions of a now rather dynamic field. Gorter (2013), for instance, adds to Landry & Bourhis' list some elements that they overlooked or that may not have been as ubiquitous then: «electronic flat-panel displays, LED neon lights, foam boards, electronic message centers, interactive touch screens, inflatable signage, and scrolling banners» (Gorter 2013: 191). Other authors use vaguer terms such as «the decorum of public life» (Ben-Rafael et al. 2001: 10) or «environmental print» (Huebner 2006: 31). Shohamy probably has the most inclusive, saying that the linguistic landscape comprises all of «the linguistic items found in the public space» (2006: 110). The increasing scholarly attention paid to the linguistic landscape has, over the last two decades or so, resulted in large numbers of case studies published, typically of cities (leading some authors to prefer the term *linguistic*

cityscape, see e.g. Gorter 2013: 191; Spolsky 2009). Montreal, the site of Landry & Bourhis' study (1997), has actually received quite a bit of attention (see, *inter alia*, Monnier 1989; Backhaus 2009; Dagenais et al. 2009; Lamarre et al. 2012; Lamarre 2014), for several reasons: it is a metropolis where a large number of languages are spoken, it is located in Quebec, and therefore exists within a rather elaborate provincial and federal language planning context, and it is located in North America, where English plays an important role for any kind of interactions beyond the province of Quebec (in fact, the city of Montreal can be regarded as functionally bilingual, even if not officially so, see the numbers above). As far as the language legislation is concerned, the Charter of the French language deals in some detail with the linguistic landscape: section 22 stipulates that all signs and posters of the civil administration should be in French only (with some exceptions for health and safety reasons), and section 58 says that in commercial signage and advertising, French must be «markedly predominant» if other languages are present. Subordinate legislation further clarifies this «markedly predominant» in remarkable detail, with the bottom line being that French text should be twice as large as text in the «other language». The reason for the existence of this legislation is obvious when considering that prior to Bill 101, much of the linguistic landscape of downtown Montreal, even in predominantly francophone neighbourhoods, was primarily in English. The desire to address this issue is motivated by the fact that the linguistic landscape, apart from fulfilling the basic function of staking a linguistic territorial claim, also serves an important symbolic function because, in the words of Landry and Bourhis (1997: 27), «the absence or presence of one's own language on public signs has an effect on how one feels as a member of a language group within a bilingual or multilingual setting». It is, therefore, an integral part of any status planning activity.

Signs in the linguistic landscape are normally described in terms of authorship (who makes the sign), content (how many languages are there on the sign, how are they positioned, what is the translation like), and function (informative/indexical or symbolic). The linguistic landscape is also interesting because it shines a light on the language policy context in which it exists. This includes not just the official, top-down language policies such as the legislation Quebec is famous for, but also, in Spolsky's (2004) terms, any language practice or language ideology. Thus, any belief held about language by stakeholders (whoever they may be, powerful or not) becomes part of language policy. This also explains why an eminently bottom-up sign such as the one in Figure 1 is an instantiation of a language policy: it

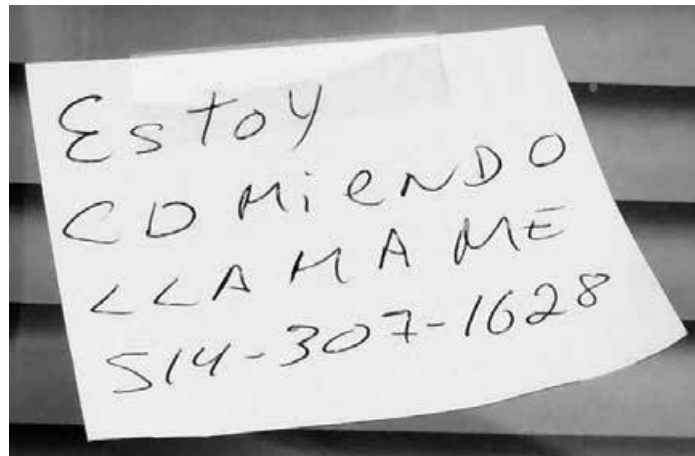


Figure 1. Handwritten Spanish note on small contractor's door



Figure 2. Bilingual warning sign in the Montreal branch of a multinational company

has an author and an intended addressee, both of whom display a particular linguistic repertoire and both of whom hold a particular set of beliefs about language and about what they can «do» with language. This sets it apart from the sign in Figure 2, found in the store of an international furniture chain that has a province-wide policy of signage that is bilingual, but strictly within the legal provisions of the Charter. The company behind the signage is obviously much more organised, has a legal requirement to internally regulate this kind of signage, and, as a result, its language ideology and policy are very different indeed from those of the hispanophone small contractor seen before. More often than not, it is a matter of how many resources can be invested in elaborating a signage policy, as well as how much reflection about language use is actually carried out.

3 Bottom-up policies in Montreal's LL

In a city as bilingual as Montreal, sign-makers often quite obviously try to appeal to readers of both French and English. Apart from bilingual signs, creative use of language can ensure that language choice is transferred away from the sign-maker to the reader, such as in Figure 3, where every word except the last one is identically spelled in both languages (and even though the spelling of «*érotique*» (here without acute accent) is different from the English «*erotic*», it is completely transparent to an L1-English reader). This is a very elegant and certainly not innocent way of marrying the two languages. There are plenty of examples such as this in Montreal, for instance Figure 4, where the spelling difference between the languages in the last syllable («*identity*» vs «*identité*») is circumvented by using the letter T, pronounced context-appropriately [te] in French and [ti] in English. Then there are signs that playfully subvert legislation, for instance the one in Figure 5, where the name as a whole, although not in a «correct» spelling in either language, can easily be read in both languages, as [ɛspɹɛʃən] (English) or [ɛgspɹɛsjɔ̃] (French) – but the spelling contains a «hidden» English meaning (the «eggs» part of the name) that is absent from French. Patricia Lamarre (2014; Lamarre et al. 2012) has published on these «bilingual winks», having found quite a few around the city playing similar tricks on her informants: for instance, a shoe shop calling itself *chou-chou*, which is a French term of endearment, but which, when pronounced in French, is also a perfect homophone of the English *shoe-shoe*, a mental association absent for readers who do not count English in their repertoire.

English is obviously the most important «other» (non-French) language in Montreal. But there are others, and the way they interact with French is equally interesting. A few years ago, in a display of OQLF² overzealousness that would later become known as «pastagate» in worldwide news, an Italian restaurant in Montreal was asked to remove non-French (Italian) words from its menu (such as *agnolotti*, *cavatelli*, etc., see e.g. Vessey 2016). This is a non-issue with many languages not written in the Latin script. Consider the sign, in Figure 6, of a barber shop where the name «Salon Mita» is next to its Hindi version. Arguably, for most passers-by, the French text is indeed «markedly predominant», unless, of course, one is literate in Devanāgarī. The sign, in any case, is still erect and has not, to date, been considered in

² The *Office Québécois de la Langue Française* is tasked with overseeing and enforcing the provisions of the Charter of the French Language.



Figure 3. Store sign with ambiguous language choice



Figure 4. Store name with spelling altered to fit both French and English readings



Figure 5. Restaurant name whose pronunciation is felicitous in both French and English, but whose spelling hides an additional English meaning



Figure 6. Salon Mita

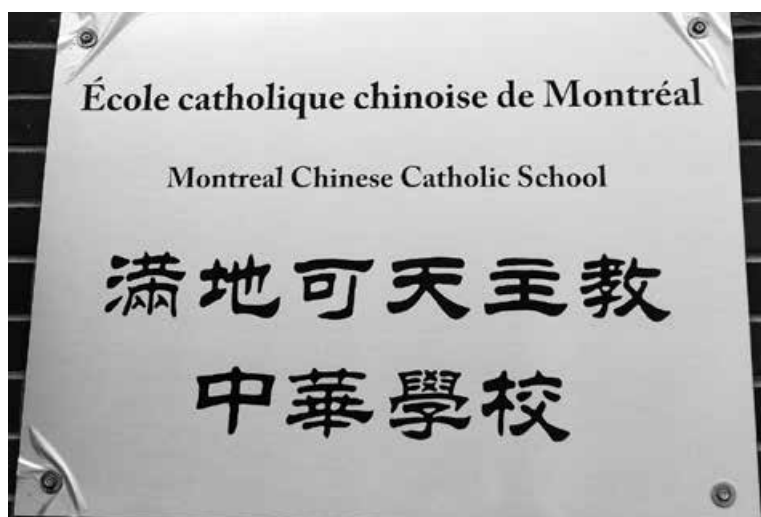


Figure 7. Trilingual sign with French predominance over English, but Chinese largest

breach of the law. A similar phenomenon is at work in Figure 7: here there are three languages, French, English, and Chinese. The French is larger than the English, but the Chinese is much larger than the French. This says something about the expectations of the policy-makers (that the French–English relationship is the important one, or, on the other hand, that the law is not actively enforced) as well as about the language ideologies of the sign-makers (who accept local legislation, i.e. French before English, but who nonetheless consider Chinese more important than either of the other two). It also shows that few who care about the predominance of French in Quebec care about Chinese in the LL of Montreal – it is not Chinese that is a threat to French in the Quebec and Canadian context, it is English.

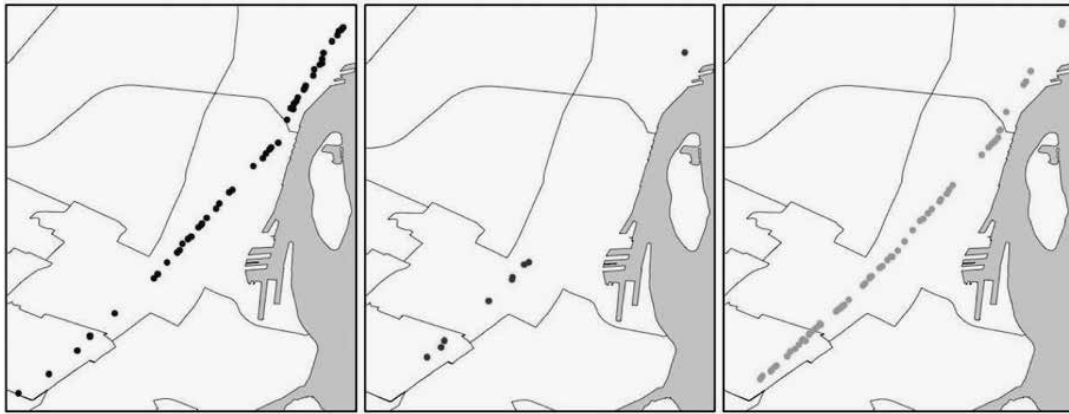


Figure 8. Distribution of LL signs along the 11.2 kilometres of rue Sainte-Catherine: monolingual French (left), monolingual English (middle), bilingual (right)

Finally, it is worth pointing out that regardless of these multilingual and creative examples, the fact remains that in the linguistic landscape of Montreal as a whole, French *does* have a markedly predominant place. Consider the map in Figure 8, which shows the geographical distribution of 148 signs systematically photographed along rue Sainte-Catherine in downtown Montreal. Monolingual French signs, represented on the leftmost map, show a distribution different from that of monolingual English signs (middle) and bilingual signs (right). Not only are there more French and bilingual signs than English ones, they also pattern roughly according to the traditional distribution of francophone and anglophone neighbourhoods in Montreal, with a higher proportion of mother-tongue French speakers east of boulevard Saint-Laurent, according to both mother tongue and home language data from the 2011 census.

4 Language struggles in (and over) the linguistic landscape

In any multilingual setting, the linguistic landscape can be the site of contestation or power struggles. That this is ongoing in Montreal can be seen in a supplement to the *Journal de Montréal* on 10 September 2016, entitled «16 idées pour préparer le 375^e anniversaire de Montréal: Restaurer le visage français de Montréal»,³ in which the author suggests ways in which to further

³ «16 ideas in preparation for Montreal's 375th anniversary: Restoring Montreal's French face».

francise the linguistic landscape of the city. The focus is on toponymy (street names), much of which retains English elements from colonial times: thus, it is suggested that rue City-Councillor should be renamed «rue des Conseillers municipaux», rue Mayor «rue de la Mairie», rue Bridge «rue du Pont-Victoria», chemin Upper-Lachine «chemin du Haut-Lachine», chemin Queen Mary «chemin Reine-Mary», and many others. The historical baggage attached with many of these names is seen to further justify their renaming: after all, the institutional status of the first two examples (City Councillors and Mayor) no longer requires them to be in the language of the erstwhile politically and economically powerful Anglophone minority, whereas the translation of rue University into «rue de l'Université» is presented as simple common sense. Note that these existing names, here slated for translation, are the official ones as registered with the Commission de Toponymie du Québec, the statutory board officialising place-names throughout the province. In actual everyday language, there is variation in how streets are called, perhaps best illustrated by rue Guy, pronounced [gai] by Anglophones and [gi] by Francophones – although there are generational differences, with the French names becoming more common (i.e. «rue de la Montagne» among young speakers but «Mountain Street» among older ones, see e.g. Scott 2012). The author of the supplement goes further by suggesting that rue Churchill (an eminently English name, of course, and found in street names in Montreal as well as in its suburbs Lasalle, Lachine, and Baie-d'Urfé) should be renamed «rue du Général de-Gaulle». This is a potentially loaded proposition, given the former French president's controversial official visit to Canada in 1967: From the balcony of the Montreal City Hall he proclaimed «Vive le Québec libre!»,⁴ with emphasis on *libre*. The phrase, favoured by advocates of Quebec sovereignty/independence, was widely considered a breach of diplomatic protocol, leading to a period of tension between Ottawa and Paris (Thomson 1988). The point here is that the superficially simple act of renaming a street, here from a British personality to a French one (note, neither being either Québécois or Canadian), brings with it a slew of other associations, linguistic, sociolinguistic, and political. In short, the linguistic landscape is almost always one of the sites in which any language debate will be fought out.

⁴ «Long live *free* Quebec!».

5 Conclusions

The study of linguistic landscapes can tell us much about the language policy and ideological processes in a place like Montreal. Firstly, it offers us some evidence of the francisation of its *visage linguistique* that has taken place after the 1970s: prior to the legislation put in place by the Charter of the French language in the wake of the Quiet Revolution, the upper echelons of the social scale in Quebec, and most visibly so in Montreal, were disproportionately occupied by English speakers, with effects on the LL (e.g. in the toponymy as well as in commercial signage). This has been redressed in commercial signage, which has been regulated by law since 1977 to the effect that French must appear (initially exclusively, now only prominently); street names, on the other hand, while also subjected to officialisation and francisation, tend to reflect older realities and are slower to change. Secondly, the LL reflects linguistic realities on the ground: the multilingual texture of the population of Montreal can be «read», to varying extents, in the (typically bottom-up) signage present in the city. Regardless, French predominates, with English coming second; the geographical distribution of non-official signs seems to pattern at least to a certain extent on the distribution of speakers in physical space. Thirdly, the LL tells us something about hierarchies and the respective relevance of languages. The fact that signs in non-Latin scripts are practically left alone points to the language dynamics at work in Montreal and Quebec: the threat (perceived or real) to the French language does not come from the Chinese or Hindi found on restaurant signs, but from English, the language of the majority of the population on the continent. In cases like those in Figures 6 and 7 above, the non-French languages fulfil primarily «decorative» functions, «indexical» ones (Scollon & Wong-Scollon 2003), rather than linguistic ones. Finally, the LL reflects linguistic struggles and linguistic insecurity, leading some sign-makers to go to great creative lengths designing shop names and advertising that circumvent the legislation on marked predominance by essentially removing the French–English distinction from words: needless to say, the large amount of shared vocabulary in the two languages makes this a fruitful undertaking supported, when needed, by creative respellings expressly designed to achieve cross-linguistic acceptability, thereby putting the onus of language assignment on the reader of the sign.

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Mónica Castillo Lluch / Rolf Kailuweit /
Claus D. Pusch (Hg.)

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