Signs of the Times: How Language, Law and Social Dynamics Interact in Public Signage

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Abstract

In contemporary urban spaces, signs are ubiquitous. Some are purely informative; others aim to regulate behaviour: all are likely to be significant in legal terms. Most obviously, the presence of a particular type of sign may be required by public law (witness CCTV surveillance, for example, or the establishment of Dispersal Zones). In other cases, certain signs are felt to strengthen someone’s (e.g., a landowner’s) case in civil law litigation (consider issues around trespassing, for example, or liability for personal injury). Thus, it is in public signs that a number of socio-legal issues crystallise: in particular, questions of preferred and sanctioned behaviours, and of the increasingly blurred demarcation between public and private space. In specifically linguistic terms, studying signage is an entry point into the more general question of how law – a frequently underrated part of the sociolinguistic context – plays a key role in shaping language.

Building on existing work about linguistic landscapes (Scollon and Scollon 2003) and public signage (e.g., Spolsky 2009), this talk aims, firstly, to establish how verbal and non-verbal means are deployed on signs to signal legal authority. Another, broader aim is to explore the relevance of directive public signage as a gauge of various social dynamics. For example, signs can be shown to index the fundamental re-definition of public space currently taking place. Also, I will consider how the exercise of citizens’ rights can be constrained by the non-specific wording of signs purporting to have some sort of legal authority (not to mention by the display of misleading or blatantly incorrect information).

Both the topic itself and the approach chosen straddle a number of social domains, so that crossing disciplinary boundaries seems almost inevitable. In the search for suitable theoretical and methodological resources, obvious feeder disciplines include sociolinguistics, semiotics and the law, as well as human and cultural geography. Yet, to the individual researcher interested in signage, such a line-up of disciplines is both stimulating and daunting and should certainly not go unreflected. That is why my talk also provides an opportunity to think more broadly about a key methodological question: Does tackling fuzzy social issues with an interdisciplinary toolkit amount to little more than unsystematic cherry-picking of concepts, or is it actually a valid approach that promises results of greater social relevance than do less eclectic ones?

Biography

Gerlinde Mautner is Full Professor and Director at the Institute for English Business Communication at the Vienna University of Economics and Business. She regularly spends extended research periods at UK universities (such as Birmingham, Lancaster, Cardiff and, in 2011, King’s College London). In 2008 she was elected to the Board of the Austrian Science Fund (a grant-giving body similar to the ESRC and HSRC). Her research interests are located at the interface of language and society. In a recent monograph, for example, she investigates how discourse both shapes and is shaped by marketisation (Language and the Market Society, Routledge 2010). Her forthcoming publications focus on the sociolinguistic and legal aspects of public signage, on the one hand, and on the role of Critical Discourse Analysis in management studies on the other.
References

