

Language Appropriation and Re-creation: Transforming a Linguistic Landscape Project in Cyberspace¹

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Introduction

During a year living and working in Panama City, Panama, while walking the streets, I was struck by the number of multilingual signs and displays that I encountered all around town. Public signs in two or more languages, but specially including a mix of Spanish and English, were ubiquitous not only in the trendy areas frequented by tourists, but also in local residential and commercial neighborhoods. Obviously, language diversity within this urban environment had become a familiar occurrence, and local residents seemed to embrace it without much consideration or questioning. It occurred to me that these multilingual messages could become a powerful object of analysis for adolescent Panamanian students learning English. Through an examination of bilingual/multilingual public signs visible in their everyday lives, students would build an awareness of the functions and values assigned to different languages within their communities. This paper describes a collaborative project conducted with 27 adolescent students enrolled in an English class at a secondary public school in Panama City. The project was conceptualized within the tradition of linguistic landscape studies (Shohamy, Ben Rafael, & Barni, 2010), and framed within a sociocultural and critical theoretical orientation.

Linguistic Landscape Studies

Linguistic landscape has been traditionally defined as all visual forms of language publicly displayed within a given geographical area, such as store windows, advertisements, traffic signs, posters, billboards, and graffiti. As Gorter (2013) explains, “The use of language in its written form in the public space is the main focus of linguistic landscape studies” (p. 191).

Lou (2016) points out that linguistic landscape analysis can perform two functions: informational and symbolic. In its informational function, it examines the linguistic preferences and habits of a particular speech community, for example, the languages used in interactions

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among speakers within a certain geographical area. In its symbolic function, it can reveal power relations, hierarchies, and the relative status of particular language groups. “Hence, a contextualized study of linguistic landscape can show how processes of micro-level linguistic production are linked with issues of power and inequality in the macro level political economy” (Lou, 2016, p. 6).

Linguistic landscape research has experienced rapid expansion in the last decade, and has attracted scholars from various fields. Researchers in applied linguistics have explored themes such as the comparison of public and private signs in particular communities (e.g., Shohamy & Ghazaleh-Mahajneh, 2012), the spread of English as a global language and its relationship to local language varieties (e.g., Huebner, 2006), and methodological issues related to documentation and mapping of signs (e.g., Barni, 2006).

More recently, linguistic landscape has been explored for its educational applications (Gorter, 2018), and a number of studies have examined pedagogical projects involving students as researchers (e.g., Burwell & Lenters, 2015; Chern & Dooley, 2014; Dagenais, Moore, Sabatier, Lamarre, & Armand, 2009; Rowland, 2013). The use of linguistic landscape as a teaching resource offers opportunities to engage students in authentic experiences within the social context where language occurs beyond the classroom. Linguistic landscape analysis can help students critically examine language choices, build an awareness of the roles played by different languages in their communities, and uncover hidden messages or ideologies that may influence them (Hewitt-Bradshaw, 2014). Perhaps most significantly, it can encourage students “to appreciate the importance of their own agency and activity as meaning makers” (Rowland, 2013, p. 502). As Sayer (2010) remarks, this type of analysis “compels the student to see the world through the eyes of a sociolinguist, who questions how and why people use language differently according to different social identities or purposes” (p. 153).

Theoretical Perspectives

This study is grounded on sociocultural and critical theoretical orientations. As discussed, linguistic landscape research attempts to connect language use to its social, political and economic contexts while addressing issues of power, status, and identity (Burwell & Lenters, 2015).

From a sociocultural theoretical perspective, language is viewed as social practice.

Contrary to traditional conceptions of language acquisition, the process of language learning does not involve a linear and gradual internalization of grammatical, lexical and phonological rules. Rather, it is a situated phenomenon that emerges from social interaction and involves “a process of apprenticeship ... in which skills and knowledge are transformed from the social into the cognitive plane” (Walqui, 2006, p. 160). A sociocultural orientation also recognizes that learning is a multimodal and mediated process. “Language learning happens by mediation, through cultural resources and tools that individuals use to move through, respond to, and make sense of their social worlds” (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 29). A wide range of modalities, including not only verbal and written language, but also other forms of representation (e.g., drawing, drama performances, gestures, gaming technologies) act as mediational tools to help learners build new knowledge (Street, 2005). Importantly, a sociocultural perspective emphasizes the multifaceted, complex, and dynamic nature of learners’ identities. It acknowledges that identities are not fixed or static, but rather are shaped and performed within learners’ lived experiences. Learners’ identities reflect relations of power negotiated within interactions, which may promote or constrain language learning. Through their sense of agency, learners may choose to invest in (or resist) learning opportunities (Norton, 2013).

Critical pedagogy is based on problem-posing (Freire, 1970). Dialogue and analysis are the foundation for reflection and action. Such an approach requires teachers to view their learners as active agents who can negotiate the content of instruction by bringing in materials or raising issues that can be incorporated into the curriculum (Crookes, 2013). It rejects teachers’ authoritative stance towards students and conceptualizes instruction as “co-investigation with students of topics of importance to both students and teachers” (Norton & Toohey, 2004, p. 12). This collaborative process allows teachers to connect classroom content to themes and issues that are relevant to students’ lives. As Wei (2014) points out, this approach involves a process of co-learning in which the teacher becomes “a learning facilitator, a scaffolder, and a critical reflection enhancer, while the learner becomes an empowered explorer, a meaning-maker, and a responsible knowledge constructor” (p. 169).

The study showcased in this article, conducted in collaboration with a group of secondary students learning English in Panama City, reflects sociocultural and critical perspectives. In examining the use of multiple languages in public spaces in their communities, the goal was for the students to interrogate issues such as local language use, the status of English, and the role

that multilingual public signs may have on identity construction through their own personal responses to these texts.

Linguistic Diversity and English Language Education in Panama

Although Spanish is the official language of Panama and spoken by the majority of its people, there is great linguistic diversity throughout the country. Several indigenous groups maintain their original languages, among them, the Ngöbe-Buglé, the Kunas, the Emberá and the Woonaan. Nevertheless, these indigenous languages are not actively taught and promoted within the national educational system. The construction of the Panama Railroad, and later the Panama Canal, in the 19th century and in the early 1900s respectively, brought in several new groups, most notably English speakers from the United States, and from Afro-Antillean countries, mainly Barbados and Jamaica. Many Panamanians of Afro-Antillean ancestry still speak English, or Panamanian Creole English, today. Several other groups also came to work in these construction projects, such as French and Chinese, and today there is still a large community of Chinese speakers in Panama. The United States had control of the Canal Zone for nearly 100 years, with a strong military and civilian presence, which created a unique form of colonialism, with segregationist and racist practices, that deeply influenced the social structure of the country (Darling, 2000). Today since Panama's economy is based on global commerce and financial services, the English language is viewed in high prestige. The capitalist classes emphasize the study of English, and elite bilingual private schools, offering coursework in English, are common in the capital (De Ricord, 1982).

In 2014, an ambitious educational reform initiative was launched by the Panamanian government to improve English language proficiency throughout the nation. Known as "Panamá Bilingüe," the program provides increased hours of English instruction at public primary and secondary schools, classroom materials, and professional development opportunities for teachers. During its first five years (2014-2019), the program is estimated to benefit approximately 25,000 teachers, 100,000 secondary students, and 160,00 primary students. It has become a flagship program for the current administration, which justifies its massive investment as a way to provide job opportunities for citizens, and to achieve successful economic growth and global competitiveness ("Panamá Bilingüe," 2018). As Sayer (2015) remarks, such rationale must be understood as an attempt "to align education curricula with neoliberal policies" (p. 41). As with similar educational initiatives in Latin America, the "bilingual" aspect of the program refers to

English education only, and it disregards the fact that a large number of Panama's indigenous population is already bilingual.

Methods

The present investigation was part of a larger study conducted during the 2016-2017 academic year. As a visiting scholar based in Panama City, I spent the year collaborating with the Panamanian Ministry of Education on its implementation of the "Panama Bilingüe" program. My involvement included participation on a number of initiatives, such as consultation with national and regional coordinators on curriculum and materials, as well as policies and procedures, and design and delivery of professional development opportunities for teachers throughout the country.

In addition to working with Ministry of Education officials at the national level on program initiatives, I conducted a yearlong ethnographic study in collaboration with a classroom teacher and her students, in two schools in Panama City, a primary and a secondary school. On a daily basis, the teacher, Nina, worked at the primary school in the mornings, and then traveled to the secondary school to teach in the afternoons. I joined Nina and her students in each school two or three times per week for the duration of my year in Panama City. In addition to observations and participation in classroom activities and school events alongside the students, I engaged in numerous informal conversations with Nina, her colleagues, and the school principal. I also collected data in the form of field notes, photos/videos of class activities, student work samples, and instructional materials. My purpose for this study was to examine ideologies in policy and in practice through collaborative ethnography (Bloome, 2012). My overarching research question was: How do students and teachers interpret and enact national policies mandated by the "Panamá Bilingüe" program within the micro level of the classroom?

The Project and Its Participants

The linguistic landscape project was conducted in collaboration with Nina and her students at the secondary school. The group consisted of 27 students, aged 15 and 16 years old, attending English classes in an afterschool program. Classes were held four days per week, Monday through Thursday, from 1:00 to 4:00 pm. Because of the extra-curricular nature of the program, although teachers were given a textbook to follow, they were encouraged to involve

students in hands-on classroom activities, and out-of-class cultural experiences such as field trips and performances.

The school, “Colegio Remon Cantera,” is located in the middle of a busy urban area surrounded by tall buildings with offices, clinics, restaurants and stores. Two modern shopping malls are nearby, as are several exclusive hotels. Built in the 1950s, the old and neglected school building contrasts quite sharply with the modern skyscrapers that surround it. It is a two-story concrete structure with classrooms lining both sides of long hallways. Most of the students who attend “Remon Cantera” do not live in the neighborhood of the school, where real estate is at a premium. They commute long distances by bus from different parts of the city. In my conversations with Nina, she talked about the sacrifices that some of her students make in order to attend the English afterschool program. They arrive at home tired late at night, with little time to complete their homework and chores. Nina also remarked that many of their families have difficult financial situations, so the free meals offered by the afterschool program are an important benefit.

When I raised the idea of developing a linguistic landscape project with Nina, she immediately agreed. As a teacher, she always strived to get students to make meaningful connections with the English language in their daily lives outside of the classroom. Through linguistic landscape analysis, we would engage with the students in a collaborative investigation of the use of English in urban public spaces, interrogating representations of power and privilege within the Panamanian context. Following a Freirian problem-posing approach (Freire, 1970), the students would conduct a critical examination of the languages and images used in signs within their own communities so they could discuss personal meanings and interpretations in relation to places, activities, and people that were familiar to them. We wanted to help the students develop a sense of language awareness, and recognize “the different values attributed to languages and language speakers, interrogate stereotypic representations of languages, language speakers, and language learning, question social inequalities and work towards greater equity” (Dagenais, Walsh, Armand, & Maraillet, 2008, p. 140). We decided to call the project “Community Languages.”

In discussing how to structure the project, we considered different approaches. Since the project was conducted in the context of an English class, we wanted to focus on multilingual signs that included the English language. A common approach used in linguistic landscape

studies is to select signs based on detailed mapping of a carefully delineated area, often within the school neighborhood (e.g., Dagenais et al., 2009). We considered doing this, perhaps by taking the students on walks in groups around “Colegio Remon Cantera” while they interacted with different signs and took pictures (e.g., Chern & Dooley, 2014). However, we soon gave up on this idea, since the streets around the school are quite busy, without sidewalks in some places, and dangerous to walk in large groups. We also realized that the neighborhood of the school wasn’t really the students’ community. Most of them hopped on and off a city bus in front of the school and didn’t spend much time in the surrounding streets. We finally decided to ask them to take pictures of signs in the neighborhoods of their homes, or during their trips to and from school, using their smart phones. The class already had a “WhatsApp” group set up, so we asked the students to send their pictures to this group. Once I received their photos, I would print them and bring them to class for us to conduct the analysis together. We repeated this process during four class sessions over a period of about a month.

The Inquiry Process

To introduce the project during the first session, I brought in a photo of a sign for us to examine together as a whole class. The photo I selected (see Figure 1) was an advertisement for Taco Bell with a picture of a chicken dish and the following text: *¡Nuevo! Naked Chicken Chalupa. Atrevida y crujiente pechuga de pollo con un toque spicy.*



Figure 1: Advertisement for Taco Bell

I thought this was an interesting sign to stimulate discussion, since it contained interesting possibilities for critical examination: a U.S. fast food chain marketing “Mexican” food in Panama, through a combination of English and Spanish words, including Mexican Spanish words such as “chalupa” and “taco.” To guide our discussion and analysis, I created a web

diagram with the picture in the middle and the following questions on the board (see Figure 2):

- Where? (Where is the sign located?)
- Who? (Who created the sign and who is the intended audience?)
- What? How? (Describe the elements of the sign, the languages used, etc.)
- Why? (Why were the words and images chosen? What is the intended impact?)

The students enthusiastically contributed their insights, which I recorded on the board while engaging in dialogue with them. In discussing the location (a Taco Bell restaurant in a nearby shopping mall), they described the place as “sophisticated,” and the people who eat there as “yeye” (Panamanian slang, meaning “rich and snobbish”). When considering the impact of the English words (“naked,” “chicken,” “spicy”), they remarked English was supposed to sound “más bonito,” “attractive,” and “commercialized.” One student, Angie, added that the sign “encourages others to learn English.”

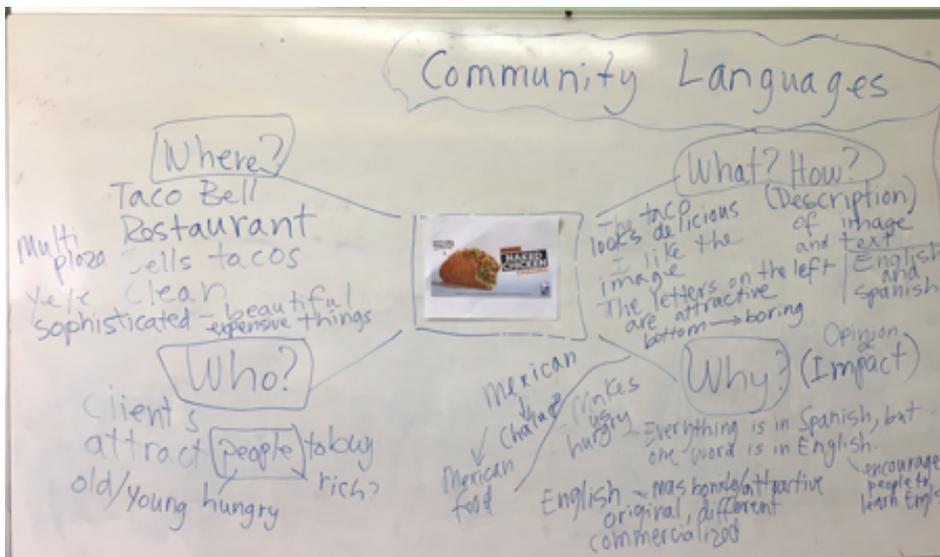


Figure 2: Web diagram produced during analysis of Taco Bell sign

It surprised me that these young students were already able to articulate quite clearly their awareness of the role of English in their social worlds. They were able to express in their own words that English was connected to capitalism (“commercialized”) and leveraged high status, as it made the sign “más bonito” and “attractive.” They also seemed to be distancing themselves from these “commercialized” messages by affirming that only those who are “yeye” (i.e., rich and snobbish) would eat there. Angie’s comment that using English words in signs would “encourage others to learn English” was also quite insightful. Her remark suggests that images

such as these can contribute to the spread and dominance of English around the world (Phillipson, 1992).

In subsequent class sessions, we followed a similar format for analysis, but with small groups working independently and simultaneously. As noted earlier, the students would send me their pictures via WhatsApp, and once a week, I would print their photos, along with some of mine, and bring them to class. Each group would look through the collection of photos and select one for analysis. After the small groups were done with their analysis, we would engage in a whole class discussion about each sign, with members of the groups sharing their insights and others offering additional interpretations. Their dialogues and deliberations were quite animated. I describe below the most common themes that emerged from these discussions.

Collaborative Analysis of Signs

In his analysis of the use of English in the linguistic landscape of Oaxaca, Mexico, Sayer (2010) categorizes different signs as “informational,” “iconic,” or “innovative” (pp. 145-146). Multilingual signs fulfilling an informational function, he points out, are intended to convey messages to speakers of different languages. Iconic signs are those that reproduce Western corporate logos of brands and products that are easily recognizable around the globe. Finally, innovative signs reflect creative uses of language for humorous or artistic effects. The signs selected by the students for analysis included all these three functions. However, the students were by far more interested and engaged in the discussions of the signs that reflected innovative language functions and that involved language play.

Informational Signs: Targeted Language Use for Distinct Speech Communities

“For trade in the community where you live” (Francisco)²

“For the people of different nationalities who talk different languages” (Gabriela)

Several groups focused their analysis on the location of the sign in relation to the speakers of the particular community or neighborhood. For example, one group examined a trilingual storefront sign for a bakery which displayed the words “Sweet House,” in English; the words “loving heart bakery house” in Mandarin Chinese (direct translation); and the words “Pastelaria,” “Cafeteria,” and “Panaderia” in Spanish (see Figure 3). The students pointed out

² Minor corrections were made in the students’ use of English to facilitate readers’ understanding.

that the store was located in the “Dorado” area, a neighborhood with a large population of Chinese speakers. As Francisco mentioned, the different languages were necessary for “trade” in that particular “community.” In a similar vein, Gabriela commented that the trilingual display would attract speakers of “different nationalities and languages.” They were emphasizing the informational function of language use, focusing on the intended audience of the sign (Lou, 2016).



Figure 3: A trilingual sign in the “Dorado” neighborhood

Iconic Signs: Commonplace Uses of English

“The information reaches the tourists as well the nationals” (Karoline)

“The picture is more important than the words” (Genesis)

As the project progressed, the students commented that many English signs and displays around the city were ubiquitous and easily recognizable by Panamanians, even those who didn’t speak English. In other words, for them, English signs were not anything unusual or special. This was especially true for corporate logos, or other “iconic” uses of English (Sayer, 2010, p. 146). As Rowland (2013) points out, when English is so commonplace, its presence becomes unremarkable. For example, one of the groups analyzed an advertisement for Little Caesars pizza restaurant containing the words “Hot-N-Ready” (see Figure 4). Karoline pointed out that although the sign didn’t contain any Spanish, it would reach “tourists as well as nationals.” As Genesis explained, young Panamanians could easily interpret it because they are very familiar with the cartoon figure of Caesar happily eating a slice of pizza. “The picture is more important

than the words,” she remarked. The students were starting to address issues related to cultural imperialism, discussing how certain images can become normalized in our environment, and used as powerful ways to promote corporate brands and products around the world (Sayer, 2010).



Figure 4: Advertisement for Little Caesars

Innovative Signs: Bilingual Language Play

Little by little, the students started gravitating towards signs that reflected more playful uses of language. In examining these innovative signs, they were quite engaged in discussions of how different features of language could be manipulated to generate new meanings, attract attention, and create humor. Some of the innovative signs featured purposeful English “errors,” others utilized famous global icons which were re-purposed in imaginative ways for local consumption; still others featured cross-linguistic puns for humorous effects. Finally, some of the signs chosen by the students reflected their personal relationships with the English language.

Purposeful “errors.”

“The English error was written for people who know Spanish” (Luis)

Several of these signs examined by the students contained English “errors,” such as a label on a bottle of window cleaner, which read: “Windo Cleaner” with the accompanying Spanish text “Limpiador de Cristales con Amoniaco” (see Figure 5). The group had an interesting discussion in trying to decide if the misspelling (i.e., “windo” instead of “window”) was deliberate or not. They finally agreed that it was purposefully intended to attract attention and create interest in the product. Luis explained that the “error” was an approximation of the way that many Panamanians pronounce the word “window.” This was an insightful observation. The students were now exploring ways that Panamanians appropriate the English language and

modify it for the purpose of communicating with other Panamanians, defying pre-imposed, external conventions. The “error” represented an act of resistance by fellow Panamanians towards the English language.



Figure 5: Label on a bottle of window cleaner

“We think they did it on purpose to take our attention, but they did it so bad” (Cesar)

“Chinese people are more careful than Panamanians... Panamanians shorten everything” (Samuel)

Another example of creative English misspelling was a storefront sign for a laundromat called “El Prity,” which also included the Spanish words “Lavanderia” and “Sastreria” (see Figure 6). This was perhaps the sign that caused the most enthusiasm, laughter, and heated discussion among the students. The sign was indeed quite interesting. It included the word “pretty” misspelled as “prity,” preceded by the Spanish article “el.” In this case, the appropriation of the English language was quite innovative because it reflected not only a misspelling, but also a break in English grammatical rules. The word “pretty” in English is normally an adjective, but in this sign the placement of the article “el” makes it a noun in Spanish. The students agreed that the sign was designed to draw attention, but as Cesar remarked it was done in “bad” way. Since the sign was located in a neighborhood with a large concentration of Chinese speakers, the group had an animated discussion trying to guess the ethnicity of the business owner. Finally they concluded that it had to be a Panamanian business because, as Samuel remarked, “Chinese people are more careful than Panamanians” and “Panamanians shorten everything,” referring to a practice in colloquial Panamanian Spanish of omitting the final syllable or last consonant in certain words. Samuel’s comments referenced a commonly held stereotype about Chinese-Panamanians, who were often portrayed as hard working and “careful.” It also reflected the dominance of linguistic purity. For him, breaking the spelling rules of English in a public display was “bad,” even if it served the purpose of drawing

attention and creating humor. These comments revealed a contradiction: On one hand, the students admired the creativity and humor produced by the “error;” on the other, they criticized the transgression of linguistic rules. The students saw themselves as “both inheritors of patterns and conventions of meaning and at the same time active designers of meaning” (New London Group 1996, p. 65, cited in Rowland, 2013, p. 502).



Figure 6: Storefront sign for “El Prity” Laundromat

Appropriation of icons.

“It’s a reference to the movie Jurassic Park” (Jeymar)

“Fun way to attract the attention of the community and then they buy the products”

(Emily)

Gradually, the students became more and more interested in selecting signs that reflected humor and play through ludic manipulations of Spanish and English words. These playful uses of language seemed very appealing to them. One example was a sign for a bakery named “Jurassic Pan” (see Figure 7). The sign contained a reproduction of the familiar “Jurassic Park” logo with the profile image of a big dinosaur, but with the Spanish word “pan” replacing the word “park.” It also included the Spanish words “panaderia” and “pasteleria” underneath the logo. Jeymar and Emily explained that the reference to the movie and the change in words inspired fun, attracted customers, and compelled them to buy bread. Unlike the Little Caesar sign in Figure 4, which was created by a global/Western corporation to market its own product, this “Jurassic” sign exploited the easily recognizable logo, and cleverly manipulated it to achieve a purpose within the local economy.



Figure 7: Storefront sign for “Jurassic Pan” Bakery

Cross-linguistic puns.

“They made a joke involving English and Spanish to cause laughter. They thought that English is similar to Spanish” (Eduardo)

As the project progressed, the students started to modify, adapt, and re-shape our collaborative inquiry. Instead of restricting themselves to physical public signs found in their neighborhoods and in other familiar places within the city, they began to explore uses of English within the Internet. During the second half of the project, all of the photos they selected were from memes they encountered in social media. One example was an image found on Instagram of a jaguar interviewing a fox, which was shared by Eduardo’s group with the class. The picture was accompanied by the following caption: “¿Jaguar you? No, I’m, zorri” (see Figure 8). The short dialogue is a play on words combining English and Spanish: The word “jaguar” in Spanish sounds like “how are” in English, and the word “sorry” in English sounds like “zorri” (or “zorro”) in Spanish. Because the meme utilizes both Spanish and English, only bilingual speakers can understand the pun. Eduardo explained that the meme utilizes sounds of English that are “similar to Spanish,” in order to “joke” and “cause laughter.” This type of language play involves a sophisticated manipulation of the sounds and meanings of both languages. As Luk (2013) remarks, “language play not only provides an evidence of linguistic ingenuity for mental pleasure but has also been widely employed in diverse rhetorical and artistic forms” (p. 238).



Figure 8: Instagram meme with a bilingual pun

Identity displays. The students also selected memes that communicated their relationships with the English language. In a way, these memes served as mirrors which reflected their identities vis-a-vis their use of English in their everyday lives.

“This shows the difficulty of other subjects. It explains the reality in the form of a joke.”

(Catherine)

“The English is best learned when we speak, sing, and write, but not in other subjects.”

(Leyla)

One of the memes (see Figure 9) was a three-framed cartoon with three figures representing school subjects (“Matemáticas,” “Física,” and “Química”) interacting with another figure representing a student. The interaction is quite hostile, with the three school subjects bullying and kicking the student, who looks quite dejected. In the second frame, another cartoon figure approaches the student and extends its hand to offer help. Finally, in the last frame, the identity of the helpful figure is revealed: “Inglés.” In selecting this meme to analyze, the students wanted to communicate their personal preference for studying English over other school subjects. As Catherine says, the meme “explains the reality in the form of a joke.” Leyla adds that the English class is more enjoyable because it employs multiple modalities: “we speak, sing, and write.” Through this meme and its analysis, the students were expressing their preferences and habits related to the role of English (and other school subjects) in their lives.



Figure 9: A meme representing school subjects

“Young people use social network to watch what’s going on and just have fun.”

“The person wants to know some people around the world... maybe to know other countries, languages and races.” (Nayelis)

Another meme the students chose to analyze depicted a text message dialog between two strangers. One person tries to engage in conversation in English, asking several questions, and the other person answers all the questions with the word “yes.” Finally, when a Wh- question is also answered with “yes,” the conversation ends in confusion (see Figure 10). The dialog goes like this:

- Hello... Do you speak English?
- Yes.
- I want to find new friends around the world. You do not mind? I suggest that communication.
- Yes.
- Where are you from?
- Yes.
- ???

Nayelis’ comments reflected the students’ goals and aspirations for using English in their everyday lives: To participate in “social networks,” “to have fun,” and perhaps most importantly “to know people around the world” and other “countries, languages and races.” Their desire to become world citizens and to embrace linguistic and racial diversity could be realized through the English language.



Figure 10: Meme of text messaging between strangers

Original language play in cyberspace.

“El prity usa Window Cleam”

“Igual como esta escrito el prity asi mismo te deja la ropa” (Eduardo)

To my surprise, the students started engaging in their own original language play in cyberspace, joking, mocking, and teasing each other in interactions in their WhatsApp group, incorporating some of the language from the signs we had examined in class. For example, a few days after the groups had discussed the signs containing the “errors” in English (“El Prity” and “Window Clean,” see Figures 5 and 6), they started a dialog on WhatsApp incorporating these “errors” for their own humor and enjoyment. The conversation started with Idmalay posting a picture of herself in a fancy dress, and the teacher, Nina, reacting to her post by saying “Oooohhh... Idmalay. You look so pretty.” Eduardo then seizes the moment and says: “El prity.” Catherine responds: “Eduardo. Que pasa. Window Cleam.” And Eduardo continues: “El prity usa windo clean.” “Asi mismo deja la ropa.” Igual como esta escrito el prity asi mismo te deja la ropa.” The dialog continues with several students and Nina interjecting with a series of emojis (see Figure 11). Eduardo and Catherine seemed to be using the signs and memes we analyzed in class as mentor texts to be studied and imitated. By engaging in this playful interaction, the students were asserting their right to appropriate the English language, use it for humor and banter, and mix it with Spanish to create something new. This “ability to manipulate, and appreciate, linguistic forms that manifest creativity, imagination and emotional release is believed to reveal advanced competence in a language” (Luk, 2013, p. 238). Through this interaction, the students showed me that their relationship with English was far more complex than I had imagined.

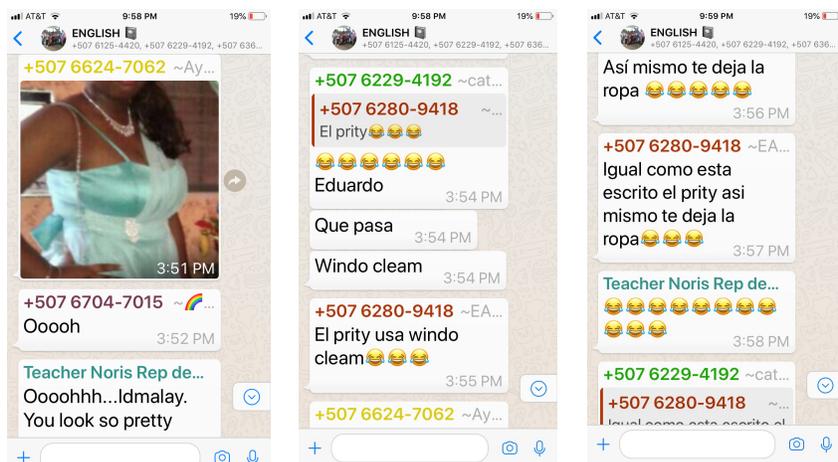


Figure 11: Extract from WhatsApp interaction incorporating signs examined in class

Reflections

Engaging in collaborative ethnography with young people requires ongoing interaction, communication and reflection, in addition to documentation, analysis, explanation and interpretation. As researchers, while building intersubjective and coeval relationships with our participants during the co-inquiry process, we are impacted and transformed along with the young people with whom we investigate (Fabian, 2012). The present study has certainly transformed me as a researcher, causing me to reevaluate previously held assumptions and reconsider certain principles and notions, which had initially guided this investigation.

The important lesson I take away from this collaborative inquiry is a lesson in humility. When I first came up with the idea for the “Community Languages” project, my main objective was to engage with the students in activities that would help them uncover some of the functions that English played in the urban environment of Panama City. I wanted them to explore language use in context, and examine the different ways that language can fulfill distinct purposes, depending on its location, intended message, and target audience (Rowland, 2013). I also wanted them to critically analyze how English may be used to advance global commercial interests and neoliberal ideologies (Higgins, 2014). Finally, I wanted them to consider the role of English in shaping their social worlds and personal identities (Dagenais et al., 2009). However, from the very beginning of the project, the students showed me that they already possessed a keen sense of language awareness, and that their use of English in their everyday lives was quite sophisticated. The collaborative nature of this ethnographic investigation allowed for the students’ transformation of the project, which in turn helped me reformulate my own understandings of their relationship with the English language. Our collaborative reflections helped me grasp the students’ dynamic and agentive posture towards the English language, which involved a complex process of active engagement, resistance, and innovation.

The students discussed the importance of trilingual signs in the neighborhood of “Dorado,” where many Chinese speakers reside, so messages could reach customers “who talk different languages.” They remarked that corporate logos, such as the image of “Little Caesar,” are easily recognizable by Panamanians, expressing their awareness that English is used to exert cultural influence and promote global brands around the world. They also addressed concepts of language status, claiming that English was used in a “Taco Bell” ad because it sounded “más bonito” and “attractive,” and they explored issues related to language ideology, pointing out that

it was “commercialized.” From the beginning, they expressed their rejection of these commercialized uses of English, by claiming that the “Taco Bell” ad was directed to those whom they considered to be “yeye,” a Panamanian slang expression that means “rich and snobbish.” So, from the start of the project, these young students showed me that could easily detect the hidden interests and ideologies promoted by the signs in their landscape. These uses of English seemed commonplace to them.

Little by little, as the project progressed, the students started exploring innovative uses of English that seemed much more interesting and enjoyable to them, reflecting a great sense of creativity and an ingenious ability to engage in language play. These uses of English were more localized, created by Panamanians for Panamanians, as they required an ability to understand both English and Spanish. The students examined English “errors” in signs, which they claimed, approximated English words to the way that Panamanians pronounce them (e.g., “windo,” “prity”). They investigated how certain corporate logos or icons could be appropriated and modified for local consumption in the popular culture, as in the storefront sign for the bakery “Jurassic Pan.” They also had great pleasure in exploring puns and jokes that cleverly mixed English with Spanish for humorous effects, and they engaged in virtual dialogs through Whatsapp where they experimented with their own playful use of language. Finally, they explored their own identities vis-à-vis the English language, by selecting memes that expressed their feelings towards learning English, by contrasting it with other school subjects, and by communicating their aspirations and purposes for learning (i.e., “to know other countries, languages and races”). In affirming their desire to embrace cultural, linguistic and racial diversity through English, the students were in fact challenging the goals of the national “Panamá Bilingüe” educational initiative and its focus on job opportunities and economic growth.

During our co-inquiry process, the students also made me rethink my previous definition of the term “linguistic landscape,” which has been widely conceptualized in the literature as physical signs and public displays that can be found in streets of particular localities (Shohamy et al., 2010). By selecting memes from social media instead of taking photographs of signs found around the city, they completely re-formulated the project to reflect communicative practices in cyberspace that were more relevant and significant to their everyday social lives (Blommaert, 2016). Our dialogues led me to question my pre-conceived notion of “community,” as the

students demonstrated that uses of language in their virtual communities were perhaps more relevant than in their physical neighborhoods.

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