

**Economy in Linguistic Landscape:
A Study of Public Signboards
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Abstract

Economy in language has a strong controlling function over the whole system, something which is carried out with the least possible cost in terms of energy. The concept of economy- a tenet or tendency shared by all living organisms may be referred to as ‘**the principle of least effort**’, which consists of the objective of the use of minimum amount of effort that is necessary to achieve the maximum results. This principle operates in linguistic behavior at the very core of linguistic evolution. The aim of this paper is to highlight the role of economy in linguistic landscape in the theoretical framework of **Columbia School of Linguistics (CSL)** also formally known as **Form Content Linguistics**. The theoretical basis of the theory of CSL is a chain of scholarly descent from Ferdinand de Saussure and Andre Martinet. It started from Prague School and reached to the Columbia School of Linguistics under the steward leadership of Prof. William Diver who reared and nurtured this theory at Columbia University through further research. The data for the present study was collected through photography method.

Keywords: Economy, language, linguistic landscape, Columbia School of linguistics.

1. Introduction

Language surrounds us everywhere, no matter where we are in the world today. It is not confined within us but is also extensively used as a tool for selling via flashy advertisements and commercials. It may also appear in the form of the names of buildings, streets, and shops, and we can also find it as instructions, warnings or in a number of other ways. The predominance of visual information has increased the use of signs than ever before. The highest density of signs can be found in cities and towns, particularly at main shopping streets, industrial areas, airports, public transports etc. It is seen that people prefer sign vocabulary to natural language. The following lyrical lines define its significance aptly:

*“Sign, sign, everywhere a sign,
Blockin’ out the scenery, breakin’ my mind.
Do this, don’t do that,
Can’t you read the sign?”*
(“Signs”- Five Man Electrical Band, 1971)

Government bodies are considered to be an integral part in linguistic landscape as they regulate the use of signs to a large extent. Even these authorities constitute one of the five categories of actors involved in the construction of linguistic landscape¹. The signs in linguistic landscape produce an economic benefit. It is well known that people want to achieve maximum benefits with least amount of input in all walks of life. Hence, they follow the economy principle while performing various activities.

In linguistic science, the ‘economy principle’ is currently an accepted term that can have lots of different values and meanings. Economy Principle is also called ‘the principle of least effort’. “Economy”, as a tendency, is shared by all living organisms. The cause of it is said to be the ‘idleness’, one of the inherent traits of human being. The word ‘economy’ reveals position interpretations such as ‘gain’, ‘thrift’, ‘less burden’, etc. Economy is considered to be an important aspect in a good administration. One of the meanings of the word ‘economy’ may be ‘to be careful on spending’. Language processes are also affected by economic processes and vice versa.

2. Views of Scholars

- The notable linguist **Whitney** acknowledged the role of economy principle in language changes and came to a conclusion that humans always try “*to make things easy to our organs of speech, to economize time and effort in the work of expression*”. (Whitney,1877:345)
- Another important figure is H. Sweet, who talked about the two principles of economy in phonology: “*a) dropping of superfluous sounds; b) ease of translation from one sound to another, which leads to convergence and assimilation.....*” (Sweet,1888:156)
- The American linguist, Werner Leopold argued that any linguistic system contains two types of contradictory tendencies, “*linguistic development follows not one tendency, but two opposing ones: towards distinctness and towards economy. Either of these poles prevails, but both are present and alternately preponderant*”. (Leopold,1930:102)

3. The Economy Principle in Columbia School Linguistics

‘Economy’ is a subset of ‘Human Behavior’ which is one of the five orienting principles in Columbia School Linguistics. The foundation of this school of linguistics was laid by William Diver in the 2nd half of the 20th century. Diver was an innovator in the introduction of ‘Human Behavior’ in analyzing the structure and functioning of language², which became a cornerstone in his theory. Diver claimed that linguistic knowledge cannot said to be different from other

¹ Edelman and Gorter (2010) mention five categories of actors that play a role in the construction of linguistic landscape- 1) the businesses that put up signs, 2) people responsible for the design, production and sale of signs, 3) the private persons who put up signs, 4) the authorities, and the final category of the actors is 5) the passers-by.

² The idea of human factor is also found in Zipf (1949), but Zipf applied it in limited ways, didn’t present a comprehensive linguistic theory dealing with human factor.

types of knowledge acquired by human beings, in the same way, linguistic behavior cannot be said to be different from that of ordinary human behavior. (Huffman, 2011) Laziness being one of the inherent human traits leads them to seek ‘minimax solution’ between accomplishment and efforts. This results in the minimum amount of effort that is necessary for gaining maximum result, so that nothing is wasted. Indolence, one of the inherent attributes of human being, leads them to pursue the economy principle with the same objective in all activities, carried out most efficiently with least possible cost in terms of energy. CSL theory has expanded its applications to applied interdisciplinary areas like literature, education, neurosciences, translation etc. especially in the area of phonology³.

Andre Martinet is considered to be an important figure in the development of the economy principle, though there were scholars before him who also talked about it but was restricted to other disciplines and not in the field of language. In 1864, Fredrick Max Muller, a German philologist, also raised his theories about the economy principle in language, “all the developments that are the result of phonetic alternations have a physiological explanation following the general principle of simplification, also known as the economy forcing principle or the principle of “least effort”. By this view, users are inclined to economize the resources and tools for achieving communication successfully, Martinet named it the least effort for a particular purpose.

4. On the Notion of Linguistic Landscape

4.1. Etymology

The dictionary meaning of the word ‘landscape’ refers to ‘a piece of scenery as well as to the genre of art dealing with the depiction of natural scenery’.

The use of the word ‘landscape’ was first recorded in English in 1598. It is a loan word in English language; it has been taken from Dutch, where the term was being used by the painters, who were getting fame for their skills in the landscape genre. The word ‘landscape’ in Dutch originally means ‘region’ or ‘tract of land’. However, the 16th century brought an artistic significance to the word when it began to be used as ‘picture depicting scenery on land’. In Germanic languages the word for landscape is similar: in German it is ‘landschaft’, in Danish, ‘landskab’ and in Norwegian and Swedish, the word is ‘landskap’. (Gorter, 2006: 82,83)

4.2. The Linguistic Landscape-

“Linguistic Landscape, indeed constitutes the very scene-made of streets, corners, circuses, parks, buildings- where society’s public life takes place. As such this scene carries crucial sociosymbolic importance as it actually identifies- and thus serves as the emblem of societies, communities and region”.

³ For more insights see Tobin (1997).

(Ban-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara and Trumper-Hecht, 2006)

Linguistic Landscape is found everywhere, open to all, comprising the text to disseminate information, directions, warnings and messages etc. These texts are written in the dominant language or the languages of that particular community, where these landscapes are being used. These signs are used to indicate direction on how to get to a place, as in the case of guidance signs, or simply call attention to it, as advertisement signs do. The study of these texts is referred to as 'Linguistic Landscape'. Ban-Rafael et.al. (2006:14) define linguistic landscape as *“any sign announcement located outside or inside a public institution or a private business in a given geographical location”*. In the same token, Gorter (2006:2) holds the view that *“the use of language in its written form in public sphere”*. Numerous signs speak to us daily in the public space. Residential areas consist of street signs, name plates or texts on mailboxes; while in commercial areas, we find an abundance of signs.

Linguistic Landscape as an area of study is relatively new, drawn from several academic disciplines namely applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology and cultural geography. The notion of linguistic landscape for the very first time was introduced by Landry and Bourhis in 1997 and define it as:

“The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs and public signs on government buildings combine to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration”

In 2008, Shohamy and Gorter widened the scope of the definition by including:

“Language in the environment, words and images displayed and exposed in public spaces, that is the center of attention in this rapidly growing area referred to as Linguistic Landscape (LL)”.

4.3. Motives for Linguistic Landscape

- To entertain: advertisements, quotations etc.
- To instruct: warnings, traffic signs, signs of street names etc.
- To spread news: announcements, notices etc.
- To carry on business and other co-operative enterprises: shop signs, private business sign etc.

5. Aims and Objective

The framework of this paper has been prepared by keeping the following objectives in mind:

- To examine the use of language displayed and exposed in public spaces from an economic perspective.

- To show how messages are being conveyed by an economic use of language.
- To talk about how people tend towards ‘minimax solution’.
- To focus on the embodiment of economy principle in the study of the public sign boards.

6. Methodology

While dealing with linguistic landscape, it must be kept in mind that the field of linguistic landscape relies on photography and visual analysis. That is the reason why the core data of this study was gathered through photography method. The recent developments in the field of digital camera technology made it possible to capture a number of photographs at a relatively low cost. Cell phone cameras have also added another dimension to it.

As mentioned earlier, the main method of collecting data was “photography”. As a result, for the present study around two hundred (200) photographs were taken from different public places such as malls, street signs, restaurant, shops etc. After collecting a sizeable data, the next task was to analyze them from an economical point of view that is purely associated with the human factor.

7. Findings

During the collection and analysis of the data we came across certain interesting results that are as follows-

7.1. Use of ‘Sign Language’

It is seen that linguistic landscape prefers the use of Signs (symbols, icons and indexes) for conveying a message to the masses such as ‘the traffic system’. The use of these signs can be seen through-out linguistic landscape to serve different purposes. Being economic, these signs also serve the purpose of being attractive; it is seen that the landscapes having only written material are considered to be boring than those of having attractive images. (Hashmi and Mohsin, 2017: 61-68)

It may be seen that figures 1, 2 and 3 support this point. These figures lend support to the view that ‘economy’ is fundamental in linguistic landscape. For instance, in place of writing the whole story like ‘capturing pictures is prohibited in this particular place’; one simple icon (cf. figure-1) is preferred. The same appears in figures 2 and 3 also because they depict a complete story in themselves but are represented in icons. Thus, we find that signs have an ability to produce an economic benefit which is very difficult to achieve in case of a handwritten note stuck on the wall.



Figure-1



Figure- 2



Figure- 3

7.2. Domination of Content Words

While analyzing the data it was noticed that there was a dominance of content words, while the use of function words is avoided. The reason for this may lie in the fact that for conveying a message, content words are mandatory and the lack of the use of function words can help the decoder understand the whole idea of the message. It is worth noting that if our purpose of conveying messages via minimum use or avoidance of function words is served, then their avoidance is justified with a perfect balance to support the minimax solution- minimum efforts to gain maximum output. This in turn would result in economy. Figures 4, 5, 6 & 7 clearly show that that how there is a dominance of content words in Linguistic Landscape.



Figure- 4



Figure- 5



Figure- 6



Figure- 7

7.4. Use of Abbreviations and Short Forms

It may be readily agreed that the use of abbreviations and short forms saves a lot of time and energy and that is the reason why Linguistic Landscape prefers the use of these abbreviations and the short forms. The words ‘minute’, ‘yards’, ‘meter’ etc. are always used in their short forms as ‘min’, ‘yds’, ‘mtr’. Similarly, phrases like ‘meters per second’, ‘kilometer per hour’ etc. are very frequent in case of road signs and it is seen that most of the time these are used in the form of abbreviations such as ‘M.P.H’, ‘KM.P.H.’ as we can see in figure 8, 9 and 10. The use of such abbreviated or short forms definitely justifies the economy principle pertaining to linguistic landscape.



Figure- 8



Figure- 9



Figure- 10

8. Concluding Remarks

The present analysis of the public signage (Linguistic Landscape) is based on the assumption that the field of Linguistic Landscape prefers an economic use of language, as a result, humans save their time and energy. There is a lot of gap, but humans are still able to successfully get their message across to the decoder. Thus, it can be said that humans are endowed with a number of traits out of which laziness and intelligence together pave the path for economy and inference.

NOTE

Due to the lack of access to the pictures an important and relevant point is missing in the above findings, that is the use of 'ka' and 'ki' forms to refer to the 'washrooms for male' and the 'washrooms for female' respectively ('ka'- washroom for males and 'ki'- washroom for female).

These forms were found at the sign-boards of the washrooms of multiplex cinema in Great Value Mall located in Aligarh city.

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