India is one of the leading multilingual nations in the world today. The country presents a unique example of ethnic, socio-cultural and religious diversity that has resulted in linguistic diversity. In the numerous language-contact situations, the incidence of bilingualism and multilingualism is very high. The multilingual reality in India dictates that in language planning the country should aim at unity underlying diversity, rather than seek triumph over diversity (Choudry 2001: 391, 404). Given this multitude of languages it does not come as a surprise that several Indian scholars are interested in the study of the linguistic landscape (LL). This concept can be defined as all the linguistic objects which are visible in the public arena as it is shaped by individuals, voluntary groups, commercial enterprises, government authorities, and so on. The linguistic landscape of a territory can serve two basic functions: an informational function and a symbolic function (Landry & Bourhis 1997: 25). However, in the literature the concept of LL is also used in a less limited way, and then it can refer to just any situation where many languages are in use.

This book contains a selection of the revised papers presented at the first seminar specially devoted to this topic in India. The seminar was organized by the Geolinguistics Group of the Central Institute of Indian Languages in February 2002. The book contains seventeen articles that span a broad range of topics. It becomes clear that the study of the linguistic landscape can be viewed in many different ways.

Probal Dasgupta provides a theoretical perspective on the field. For him linguistic landscaping is an intentional designed activity of the ‘overt imagination’. However, it is not predetermined, as the LL will unfold at the same time as others introduce their unknown designs into the LL. In another programmatic article Udaya Narayana Singh takes the perspective of language planning. He proposes that linguistic landscaping is an organized intervention, which will add to
the ‘functionality’ of a language by, for example, developing a script, reforming spelling or developing a style manual. Secondly, it will add to the ‘storage system’ of a language for example by creating a terminology bank or compiling a textbook. Thirdly there are ‘linkages’ with other social and virtual systems.

The paper by Bhattacharya gives useful and detailed information on the linguistic composition of India as a whole, based on the 1991 census returns (the 2001 results were not available at the time). Several thousands of names of mother tongues were returned in the census, but after a process of rationalization there remain 114 languages with more than 10,000 speakers each. Of those, eighteen are recognized as ‘Scheduled Languages’ which taken together comprise 96% of the population. Khubchandani provides a language profile of the three new States that were established in 2000.

The articles of Dhongde, Ramamoorthy and Ajit Naik are closest to linguistic landscaping as defined by Landry and Bourhis (1997). An important finding is that Hindi and English dominate in public signs and that tribal languages lack visibility in the public sphere. In the other articles a broader scope is taken and they are not limited to the written form of language. In the case of India this makes sense, because otherwise the spoken languages of minority groups would be ignored. The papers by Sachdeva, Gnanasundaram, Sumana, Gargesh, Abha and Tapati, Shailendra Mohan and Ganesh Murmu deal with linguistic landscaping in the broader sense of the use of many languages. Subbarao even views grammatical description of language as linguistic landscaping.

The collection as a whole is a valuable addition to the new field of LL and serves to highlight its importance. Across the world the interest in the study of LL is growing. As a country with a very rich multilingual composition, India seems a fruitful place to continue with such studies.

References


Reviewer’s address

P.O. Box 54
8900 AB Ljouwert/Leeuwarden, Netherlands
dgorter@fa.knaw.nl
About the reviewer

Durk Gorter is professor of Frisian and sociolinguistics at the University of Amsterdam and researcher at the Fryske Akademy in Ljouwert/Leeuwarden (Friesland). His research interests include multilingualism, minority languages, language policy and the linguistic landscape.

==


Reviewed by Humphrey Tonkin

Abram de Swaan cannot be described as a conventional sociolinguist. In his field, sociology, he has been particularly concerned with issues of economic and political sociology and is perhaps best known for his critical examination of the welfare state, In Care of the State: Health Care, Education and Welfare in Europe and the USA (1988). But of late he has applied his formidable skills as a student of systems to what he describes as the global language system. Words of the World is of extraordinary importance to readers of LPLP because it looks at language on a worldwide scale and even the local examples that de Swaan uses are firmly set in a global context.

For de Swaan the global language system consists of a vast constellation in which minor languages revolve around “central” languages, “central” languages revolve around “supercentral” languages and the entire system revolves around the “hypercentral” English language. This situation has come about through economic and political competition and compromise, in which trade-offs and power plays have produced the particular language ecology that we find in the world today. The system is held in place by a pattern of bilingual and multilingual communication in which, for the most part, speakers of weaker languages use and learn the stronger ones, serving as mediators and gate-keepers in the processes of communication among languages and reinforcing the hierarchical nature of the system. We can attribute to particular languages a particular communication value in a given setting or group of settings — an assumption that intersects with the work of Pool and Selten on game theory (and Pool and Fettes on “interlingualism”) and the work of Grin, Vaillancourt and others on the economics of multilingualism. Such an assumption implies that there might be (despite the hint of oxymoron) practical and rational ways of assessing the relative value of alternative language regimes.