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Im/politeness on the move: A study of regulatory discourse practices in Slovakia's centre of tourism

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ABSTRACT

Centres of tourism across the world are established by social practices performed by actors in the tourism industry, among which practices of im/politeness, as displayed in public signs and notices, can be seen as conveying particular configurations of interpersonal relations and contributing thus to the making of 'linguascapes'. It is suggested that the ubiquitous public signage offers visitors a possibility to infer the norms and values to which their authors orientate themselves as well as a key to the study of the overarching societal politeness ethos. Our ethnographic study explores im/politeness practices carried out in the Štrbské Pleso holiday resort, Slovakia's prime site of mountain tourism, using a corpus of its public regulatory signage in which directive speech acts of requesting and prohibiting are performed. The overall aim of the study is to explore how the manifestations of the key tension between homogenization and heterogenization within the current 'geocultural globalization' is resolved in place. We conclude that the patterns of regulatory discourse practices of the place emerge from the hybridity and amalgamation of globally-uniform and locally-endemic resources which are transculturally mobile and which are relocalized bidirectionally. The theoretical-methodological approaches used are the sociolinguistics of globalization, politeness as social practice, linguistic landscape, and geosemiotics and the key analytical tool is ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis.

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1. Introduction

The current era of globalization defined by Santos (2002:68) as a "multifaceted phenomenon containing economic, social, political, cultural, religious and legal dimensions, all interlinked in complex fashion" is characterised by the intensification of the speed and the widening of the scale of processes (see, e.g., Eriksen, 2007) which have reached the world's peripheries, in part because of the massive spread of tourism. International tourism, as an agent and channel of globalization (Pritchard and Jaworski, 2005), has transformed many peripheral sites into centres of global tourism. The centre-periphery dichotomy which was fixed and clearly identifiable under modernity, has been replaced with a fluid dynamic which enables regions as well as cultural practices to be simultaneously perceived as central in one sense and peripheral in another (Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes, 2013). The semiotic landscapes of globalized environments can be seen as reflecting mutually overlapping flows of languages, registers and discourse practices resulting in unpredictable patterns of orderliness. These patterns are often far away from what some critics of globalization see as its homogenizing force which threatens world cultures (see, e.g.,

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Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996) and rather point to the dual agency of globalization, viz. as a homogenizing as well as a heterogenizing force which brings about new diversities (cf. Eriksen, 2007).

Although tourism is perceived primarily as one of the world's largest economic activities, in the research field of tourism discourse it is approached as a set of semiotic processes realized by a range of social and cultural practices at the heart of which lies language along with other semiotic modes (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2011). The overt manifestations of these practices are tourist 'linguascapes' (Jaworski et al., 2003) which extend tourists' experience from the domain of 'tourist gaze', in which visibility is central to the "consumption" of place (Urry, 2005), to language and other symbolic resources which have become "highly marketable commodities" (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2011:289) in the symbolic market of tourism.

The aim of the paper is to explore the tourist 'linguandscape' of Štrbské Pleso, a centre of year-round tourism located at the southern foot of the High Tatras mountain range in Slovakia, and to investigate the presence of globalization in discourse practices which shape its public regulatory signage. Since the early 1990s, the place has outgrown its status as a local/national holiday site to become an aspiring transnational/global tourist centre. Our main objective is to examine which semiotic resources are used to construct im/politeness practices and see whether or not they lead to homogenization resulting from a transfer and adoption of globally uniform patterns of interaction. Also, we are interested in seeing how globalized practices enter the semiotic regime of the place, i.e. whether they replace existing practices or whether they mingle with them to produce new forms of signage.

We approach the physical environment of Štrbské Pleso as a semiotic and socially constructed space which is given meaning by various social practices carried out in it (see, e.g. Pennycook, 2010; Schatzki, 2001). Here we focus on the practice of the placement of regulatory inscriptions across its physical space which collectively form its "regulatory discourse" (Scollon and Scollon, 2003) and represent a distinct layer of its 'linguistic landscape' (see, e.g. Landry and Bourhis, 1997).

2. Theoretical background

To examine how im/politeness and globalization are projected onto the public signage in the examined tourist area, we combine several approaches: geosemiotics, linguistic landscape, sociolinguistics of globalization, and politeness as social practice.

First, geosemiotics (Scollon and Scollon, 2003) provides us with the basic conceptual apparatus necessary when we want to talk about signs and their emplacement in the physical location by means of which their producers activate their meaning. Two principles of geosemiotics are decisive in its inclusion into our theoretical framework: first, the principle of indexicality according to which "where on earth an action takes place is an important part of its meaning" (Scollon and Scollon, 2003:19), and second, the principle of dialogicality which posits that all signs operate in semiotic aggregates. Geosemiotics integrates three relatively autonomous semiotic systems: the interaction order inspired by Goffman's (1963, 1971) sociocultural theory, visual semiotics built upon Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001, 2006) grammar of visual design, and place semiotics, and it is at their intersection where social actions acquire meaning.

Linguistic landscape studies (LLS) share with geosemiotics an interest in signs in public spaces but go beyond it by dealing with "the presence, representation, meanings and interpretation of languages displayed in public places" (Shohamy and Ben-Rafael, 2015:1). Since its inception in the mid-1990s (Landry and Bourhis, 1997) the discipline has established itself as a fully-fledged branch of sociolinguistics focussing on the "symbolic construction of the public space" (Ben-Rafael, 2009: 41) (for a brief overview of its dynamic development see, for example, Shohamy and Ben-Rafael, 2015). Over the past two decades LLS have expanded their multidisciplinary orientation, broadened their scope to include multimodal LL texts and sharpened their methodological apparatus. More recently, a turn in LLS has been made away from an earlier predominance of quantitatively oriented researches focussing on counting languages and mapping their distribution towards a qualitative, "more mature semiotic approach in which signs themselves are given greater attention" (Blommaert and Maly, 2014:3). It is this qualitative angle that we adopt in the present study by using ethnographic LL analysis as the main analytical instrument.

There are several points of overlap between LLS and geosemiotics and many LL researchers incorporate geosemiotics in their own analyses (e.g., Huebner, 2009; Lou, 2010; Blommaert and Maly, 2014). What partly justifies the inclusion of LL in the present study is the interpretation of the presence of English in LLS across the world as resulting from the processes of globalization (see, e.g., Edelman, 2006; Blommaert, 2013; Gorter and Cenoz, 2015). Through the flow of globalizing cultural patterns, of which English is a vehicle (Bruyl-Olmedo and Juan-Garau, 2009), many places in the world look similar not only visually but also ideologically, since they are sites where power relations between social actors are played out. However, our claim is that rather than being adopted wholesale, these patterns tend to be adapted and transformed to merge with the local practices, with their unique indexicalities and historicities, already in place. This type of merger leads some authors to talk about particular configuration practices in terms of "multiple globalization", or "global particularism" (Ben-Rafael and Ben-Rafael, 2015).

Existing research into Slovak linguistic landscapes is rather limited. In the few studies available, researchers combine quantitative and qualitative methods to study urban multilingualism (e.g., Satinská, 2013), linguistic practices in Slovak-Hungarian linguistically mixed settings (Laihonen, 2015), and post-communist ideological landscapes (Sloboda, 2009). Some of the researchers focus specifically on regulatory discourse (e.g., Laihonen, 2016; Ferencík, 2015, 2016).

It is not uncommon for LL researchers to draw their data from tourist sites (e.g., Torkington, 2009; Bruyl-Olmedo and Juan-Garau, 2009), which brings forward the relevance of tourism studies in this work. Despite the wealth of themes studied within tourism discourse (e.g. Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010; Thurlow and Jaworski, 2010, 2011), there has been a lack of research into the politeness aspects of communication in tourism, which the present study addresses by focussing on regulatory discourse, which is also a way of "consuming" a tourist place (Urry, 2005).

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