Semiotic Landscape in Cyprus:
Verbo-Cultural Palimpsests as Visual Communication Strategy in Private (Shop) Signs in Limassol

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ABSTRACT

The scope of this article is the semiotic study of the verbal, visual and spatial discourses as they are depicted on commercial signs in the city of Limassol, Cyprus that use modified verbal signs and verbo-cultural palimpsests for the purpose of commercial communication. It is widely believed that the marketplace of every city constitutes an aggregation of signs that form the image of the city. The contribution of this study lies in the fact that it focuses on the verbo-cultural palimpsests used on private signs, a special type of communication that scholars who study commercial communication have not yet paid much attention to.

KEYWORDS

Graphic Design, Nonverbal Communication, Private Signs, Semiotic Landscape, Typography, Urban Semiotics, Verbo-Cultural Palimpsests

1. FROM THE LINGUISTIC TO THE SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPE

The field of linguistic landscape is very promising for sociolinguistics researchers, considering all the linguistic signs that appear in everyday socio-economic and cultural contexts. However, non-verbal signs occur as well, often playing a significant role in linguistic decoding. By elevating the contribution of non-verbal signs, semiotic landscapes have become inextricably tied to linguistic landscapes. As Beasley and Danesi (2002, p. 32) state, semiotics “[…] aims to investigate semiosis—the capacity to produce and comprehend signs – and representation—the activity of using signs to make messages and meanings.” The study of meaning seems then to be a crucial element in interpreting linguistic landscape, which is a purely cultural process of interpretation based on participant observation. Jaworski and Thurlow (2010, p. 3) also mention:

Landscape […] is a broader concept pertaining to how we view and interpret space in ways that are contingent on geographical, social, economic, legal, cultural, emotional circumstances, as well as our practical uses on physical environment as nature and territory, aesthetic judgments, memory, myth […]

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That broader concept is what the semiotic landscape attempts to examine. Waterton and Watson (2014, p. 10) state that “[t]he semiotic landscape is thus reconstituted as a space where representations interact with experience and engagement, and where affect and emotion are mobilized by and, in turn, mobilize representational practices.” However, language is not the only semiotic system; perhaps it the most important,2 but it isn’t the only one. According to Jaworski and Thurlow (2010, p. back cover), semiotic landscape looks at how landscape generates meaning, combining three major areas of scholarly interest, each concerned with central aspects of contemporary life: language and visual discourse, spatial practices, and, lastly, the changes brought about by global capitalism and ever-increasing mediatization.

Global capitalism and increased mediatization also influence everyday visual communication. According to Yoka and Paschalidis (2015, p. x):

[the concept of the everyday, with its merging of repetitive, cyclical time with progressive, linear time, predicates a type of historical consciousness that weaves together the micro-level of social experience and action with the macro-level of socio-cultural development. In this way it helps theorize the production and reproduction of norms, as well as the breaking and refashioning of norms.

Can this breaking and refashioning of norms be the aim of commercial signs that do not use everyday forms of communication with unique meanings, but resort to verbo-cultural palimpsests to advertise their businesses instead?

The scope of our paper is the semiotic study of the verbal, visual and spatial discourses as they are depicted on commercial signs in the city of Limassol, Cyprus that use modified verbal signs and verbo-cultural palimpsests for the purpose of commercial communication. It is widely believed that the marketplace of every city constitutes an aggregation of signs that form the image of the city. In the marketplace, “[…] the world of commerce, business, publication, public and private services, and other related activities provide the opportunity for everyday competition in the linguistic landscape” (Kallen 2010, p. 43). The contribution of this study lies in the fact that it focuses on the verbo-cultural palimpsests used on private signs, a special type of communication that scholars who study commercial communication haven’t yet paid much attention to.

2. CITY AS SEMIOTIC TEXT

For the discipline of semiotics, a city, as every built space, is considered to be a text. More precisely, as Gottdiener and Lagopoulos (1986) state, semiotics considers a city to be a “…text based on a grammar of special patterns and meaningful structures.” This view is supported not only by architects but also by semioticians of culture. Thus, Lotman (1990, p. 194) mentions that “the city is a complex semiotic mechanism, a culture-generator, but it carries out this function only because it is a melting-pot of texts and codes, belonging to all kinds of languages and levels. The essential semiotic polyglottism of every city is what makes it so productive of semiotic encounters.”

Polyglottism in signs was the reason we selected Limassol for this study. As Jašo (2012, p. 90) observes, “the language of the city speaks not only of the city itself but also of the society that inhabits it.” Lotman (1990, p. 194) also observes that “the city, being the place where different national, social and stylistic codes and texts confront each other, is the place of hybridization, recordings, semiotic translations, all of which makes it into a powerful generator of new information.”

Contemporary Limassol is just such an initiator of new information, since the city has recently experienced an unprecedented growth, both financially and culturally, with: a. the establishment and commercial activity of numerous off-shore companies and foreign investors; b. the development and modernization of its commercial port, which is “the main port of Cyprus”3, and c. the recent construction and development of a modern luxury marina. These developments have led to the
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