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# Signs, billboards, and graffiti a social-spatial discourse in a regenerated council estate

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## ABSTRACT

Residents within a council housing area in Stirling, Scotland, which is undergoing regeneration, took photos for an auto-driven photo-elicitation study. There was limited guidance on what images to capture. Residents were simply invited to focus on the neighbourhood. An unexpected finding was the significance participating residents gave to the linguistic and semiotic landscape such as signs, billboards and graffiti. Within the interview, it became apparent that the participants considered the signs as part of the expression of spatial social discourse. Therefore, the billboards and signs placed there by the powerful social actors such as developers were understood and scrutinised for their claims and the lived reality of residents. Also, graffiti was understood in context with the social-spatial dialectic of being inscribed within a community with an underlying sectarian discourse.

## KEYWORDS

Linguistic and semiotic landscape; regenerated; council housing; auto-driven photo elicitation; territorial stigmatisation

## Introduction

Studies of urban space neglect, to a significant extent, the linguistic and semiotic landscape such as billboards, signage and to a lesser extent graffiti found in such settings. However, these are arguably consequential and have been given relevance by inhabitants in the present study. This research was conducted in a council housing estate in Scotland as it underwent a major regeneration, with parts of the area being demolished and rebuilt. The study invited residents, from established as well as newly built housing, to take photos of the whole area and in follow-up interviews explain and explore the images with the researcher.

It became clear that the official signs were often ambiguous and unclear to the residents as they failed to fulfil their symbolic and descriptive function; for example, advertised developments were sometimes never built. As such these signs were interpreted by the residents within the social-spatial discourse of a historically deprived community faced with unfulfilled promises by powerful urban actors. Thus, for example, residents considered billboards fundamentally different in their social-spatial discourse; at times illustrative of regeneration and progress or alternatively a reflection of decline or as *territorial stigmatisation* (Wacquant 2007).

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Hence this article overall argues that linguistic and semiotic landscape is strongly inter-linked with the social-spatial dialectic of a place and its various meanings.

## Literature review

Neighbourhoods are read and interpreted by their inhabitants, as well as society as a whole. Reading of the visual landscape and interpretation expresses the underlying discourse of society on a particular neighbourhood (Barthes 1997; Eco 1997). For example, the visual interpretation of a neighbourhood becomes apparent when considering council housing in Britain. The architecture in most cases is distinctively uniform in appearance and thus easily distinguishable from the privately-owned housing stock. Consequently, council estates have come to be recognised and understood in the context of a 1980s neoliberal ideology that equated such places with poverty and non-aspiration and which consequentially reinforced territorial stigmatisation (Wacquant 2007). Alternatively, the residents of these communities may resist this narrative by creating their discourse on a neighbourhood as a place of, for example, long-standing communities (Slater and Anderson 2012). However, there is a growing body of empirical evidence that this territorial stigmatisation is closely linked to a gentrification process whereby the stigmatised neighbourhoods are demolished and rebuilt to attract a more affluent social-economic group (Wacquant 2007; Gray and Mooney 2011; Slater and Anderson 2012; Kallin and Slater 2014; Horgan 2018).

These narratives of social relationships between different groups within the urban space are also literally inscribed in a neighbourhood by, for example, graffiti, signs and billboards; this form of expression is referred to as the “semiotic landscape”, which Jaworski and Thurlow (2010, 2) describe as “*any (public) space with visible inscription made through deliberate human intervention and meaning making*”.

The concept of “semiotic landscape” is closely linked to “linguistic landscape” which focuses primarily on language, for example, “*of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names,*” (Landry and Bourhis 1997, 25). The linguistic landscape becomes particularly pertinent in, for example, multilingual countries, in which a variety of distinct cultures, each with their language, co-exist in contested areas that may experience intense, and often violent, power struggles that are inscribed in the multi-lingual “linguistic landscape” (Ben-Rafeal et al. 2006). Landry and Bourhis (1997) argue that the linguistic landscape has two primary functions; “*the informational function*” and the “*symbolic function*”. The “*informational function*” informs about groups and their languages, such as in the United Kingdom where most signs are written in English, therefore reinforcing that imagined community. It can potentially create conflict in multilingual and bilingual societies since it can potentially highlight power relationships between groups, especially as the written language can be seen almost as a legitimisation of a language, privileging one speech community over another. The latter is described by Landry and Bourhis (1997) as the “*symbolic function*” of the linguistic landscape.

Although Landry and Bourhis (1997) focus on multilingual and bilingual communities, similar conflicts take place between different social classes. Thus Bourdieu (1990) considers language to be a class cultural marker, or “*habitus*”. Therefore, for example, signs put up by official bodies such as the local government are influenced by their creators

and their social-cultural capital. This created message can conflict with the reader who interprets these signs with a potentially different social-cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990).

Thus, language on signs and billboards can be considered as a reflection of power relationships, which also resonates with Foucault's (1967; 1991) notion of power and knowledge, whereby in the broadest sense, power is reflected within the discourse between individuals, but also between the state and the classes being closely interlinked with knowledge.

Another form of inscribing meaning into the landscape is graffiti, which is increasingly used by public bodies as a form of revitalising cities, with the aim of attracting capital. Sharon Zukin (1995) critically describes this phenomenon in terms of the "symbolic economy" and highlights its use as an attempt at the beautification of the post-industrial city space. By contrast, graffiti and their multi-layered discourse also express conflicts as Landry and Bourhis (1997, 28) point out, "*radical graffiti campaigns may block out or deface existing signs in the dominant language and replace them with script in the minority language*". However, this graffitist may also be seen as concurrent with "*dirty, animalistic, uncivilistic and profane*" behaviour, overstepping the symbolic boundaries of order, neighbourliness and property (Cresswell 1996, 40). Hence, graffiti in public spaces can be seen as disobedience as boundaries are blurred by treating public spaces like a private space (Cresswell 1996; Brighenti 2010). Therefore, the graffiti writers create their sense of place and territoriality by disobedience, which contradicts the expected behaviour within a certain place, "*challenging to the guardians of the established order*" (Cresswell 1996, 46). Expressing for example political resistance against the power of a social order and/or a form of protest over privilege.

In short, the "linguistic landscape" is closely interlinked with space, place and time, as they can only be understood in their environment, which influences place-specific discourses while simultaneously creating a place identity (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010).

## Methodology

This article presents the results of a research project in Raploch, Stirling a council housing area which is currently undergoing regeneration. The project utilised visual data as well as semi-structured interviews in the form of auto-driven photo-elicitation in a multi-phased approach to understanding the individual in a social context.

In the first instance, participants were asked to create photos of their area by using single-use disposable cameras which were provided by the researcher. Limited guidance was given on the subject matter aside from focusing on Raploch as an area. As a visual component of the environment the photo became a tool of quest. The actual process of making a photo is significant and is poignantly described by Becker (1974, 15), "*as you look thorough the viewfinder you wait until what you see 'looks right' until the composition and the moment make sense, until you see something that corresponds to your conception of what's going on.*" This description highlights the different choices and decisions a photographer makes when creating an image. Photos are thus considered a "*reflection of the photographer's point of view*" (Harper 2002, 29). At the same time, Rose (2007, 238) points out that it allows research participants to focus on the mundane, which is given little consideration in the everyday. Lapenat (2011, 206) adds that "*photographs allow people to 'view' themselves from a distance, outside their everyday*

*live(s)*”, thus increasing the chance of seeing familiar images from a different perspective. Photos created by participants also give insight beyond the explicit intention of the individual, capturing the social world of which that individual is a part (Bourdieu 1990). Hence, the photographer does not only portray what he or she sees in a social context, but is also part of it, although missing from the frame. While Pink (2007) partially agrees and considers the impact of visual culture on the person who makes photos, she argues that Bourdieu’s perception minimises both individuality and creativity. Harper (2002) considered participatory photography as an opportunity to allow to see through the cultural lens of the other thus countering the postmodern critique of looking on or at something rather than through the individual. Thus, photos created by the participants decrease research bias and are less likely to overlook important participant-defined aspects (Clark-ibáñez 2007; Lapenat 2011).

In phase 2 of the research, the photos were used as the starting point of semi-structured interviews, where the participants were asked about the reason for taking a photo of a particular object.

All participants were either residents of newly built owner-occupied housing, lived in the traditional council housing in the Raploch area or had historical links to the area. Thirteen participants took part in the completed auto-driven photo-elicitation, whereby they took photos as well as were interviewed on these. Three participants who were in their 70s and 80s preferred to only take part in a semi-structured interview for health reasons. Additionally, four professionals who worked in the area were also consulted, however, they did not create any visual data.

When analysing the data, the research drew primarily on Collier and Collier’s (1992) four-stage framework, however, other theoretical insights from Croghan et al. (2008), Radley and Taylor (2003) and Knowles and Sweetman (2004) helped inform the analysis. Thus, photos were viewed numerous times and in different angles with and without the verbal data.

## The research area

This article is presenting the results of an auto-driven photo-elicitation study of the current and ongoing regeneration of Raploch, a council housing estate in Stirling which was built in stages from the 1920s onwards. Prior to the council’s involvement, it had a long history going back to the seventeenth century of deprivation and stigmatisation, which strongly resonates with Wacquant’s (2007) discussion on “blemished place” as an area of poverty and ethnicity. In the case of Raploch, this was an area characterised by an economically marginalised Irish Roman Catholic population.

This “territorial stigmatisation” was reinforced by council action and encouraged by a structurally poor-quality housing stock as well as overcrowding (Wacquant 2007; Robertson, Smyth, and McIntosh 2008b). Therefore, from the 1980s onwards, as a result of local housing policies, it became infamous as a “sink estate”, with a large part of the population being transient. However, there was still a considerable number of residents who had strong historical links to the community and had a sense of belonging to the area (Robertson, Smyth, and McIntosh 2008a).

The local authority regeneration plan included the demolition of poor-quality housing stock, which was replaced by owner-occupied housing as well as social housing. This

resulted in a change of the social mix within the area. However, the demolitions were localised to a small geographic area which was separated by a road from the traditional council housing, creating a physical barrier between the new and the old Raploch. This resulted in the creation of two distinct communities, defined by social class and ethnicity.

## Findings

The research focus was broad, allowing participants to explore for themselves what they found relevant in their neighbourhood while it was undergoing a major regeneration process. The only guidance given was to create images of their neighbourhood. Within the oral, as well as photo data, it became apparent that the participants attributed great significance to the linguistic landscape, while considering their experience of living in Raploch, a place that is undergoing a variety of significant changes, both on a physical as well as on a social level, due to the process of regeneration.

The participants considered the linguistic landscape to consist of advertising billboards, graffiti, and official government project signs, including signs that seem to promote a potential, future housing development.

These need to be understood as part of the discourse within the urban space, as Barthes (1997) argues, especially as the signs were very closely considered by the participants, rather than just as being seen to make up part of the backdrop of the neighbourhood. It could be argued that through the visual methodology of this research, the importance of the linguistic landscape was allowed to emerge, especially as participants were not asked to focus on this but rather on the neighbourhood. These signs, billboards, and graffiti, and their interpretation by the participants, provide an insight into the constructed social relationships within Raploch, as well as in a greater social context.

## Official signs – reading public notices

Official signs can be understood as a representation of *“something other than itself”* (Backhaus 2007, 5).

Therefore, in Emily’s case, the official sign found in her photo was a symbolic representation of a new residential care home, but in this context, she found that the sign had not fulfilled its symbolic function, because the residential care home was never developed.

... it’s like an old sort of hospital but it’s like creating 21st Century neighbourhood that sign has been up for years and (laughing) and it’s like this singular thing it’s like this parks that they are supposed to get developed that one as well ... (photo) it’s supposed to be a home.

(Emily 20s)





Emily (2012) *Untitled*.

Similarly, Peter saw the sign as not fulfilling its symbolic representation, as he had understood it, of maintaining the area by cutting the grass.

My back garden looks like that that lottery don't give me money to cut it so they must still cut that. I just thought that was quite ironic ...

(Peter 40s)



Peter (2012) *Running Joke*.



Therefore, these signs became a symbol or physical representation of unfulfilled promises.

Consequently, these signs need to be seen in context with the “social spatial dialectic”, as they are understood or interpreted in their situation and surrounding. This in turn resonates with previous research on the area, which found that the community was suspicious of “*grand-sounding schemes*” that did not come to fruition as was indicated on signs (Pollock and Sharp 2012, 7). These official signs also represent a power relationship between their creators and the community, which they are supposed to inform. The passivity of the observer in the discourse presented by the sign can be seen in context with Foucault (1967, 1991), whereby the creator of the sign is in the position of power as well as knowledge. Therefore, the cryptic message on the sign can be seen as symbolically keeping the community in the dark. This becomes apparent in Emily’s comments:

... seems to be something going on to do one thing and I don’t know who owns it I don’t know if that is part of it or not I don’t think there has been really anything I have never seen any communication what’s going to happen with it.

(Emily 20s)

Extrapolating from the theory on “linguistic landscape”, as the signs do not strictly speaking exist in a bilingual environment, they can be still seen as having the “*informational function*” of marking territory linguistically, conveying messages that are cryptic for the community, and containing official logos, such as the Lottery Fund, and also by being physically placed. Therefore, the strong reactions that these signs evoke, could be interpreted as a reaction to the “*symbolic function*” these signs express in their territoriality, as well as through their cryptic promises (Landry and Bourhis, 1997).

Though Bruce created an image of a sign which he felt communicated very clearly to him the intention of the development:

It was this sign I wanted to get for you the Forth Valley college ...

(Bruce 30s)

... this whole area is getting redeveloped so they’re moving the Falkirk Council or it’s the Forth Valley College but it’s the one that was located in Falkirk Council that is this is the whole site is getting rebuilt.

(Bruce 30s)



Bruce (2012) *Untitled*.

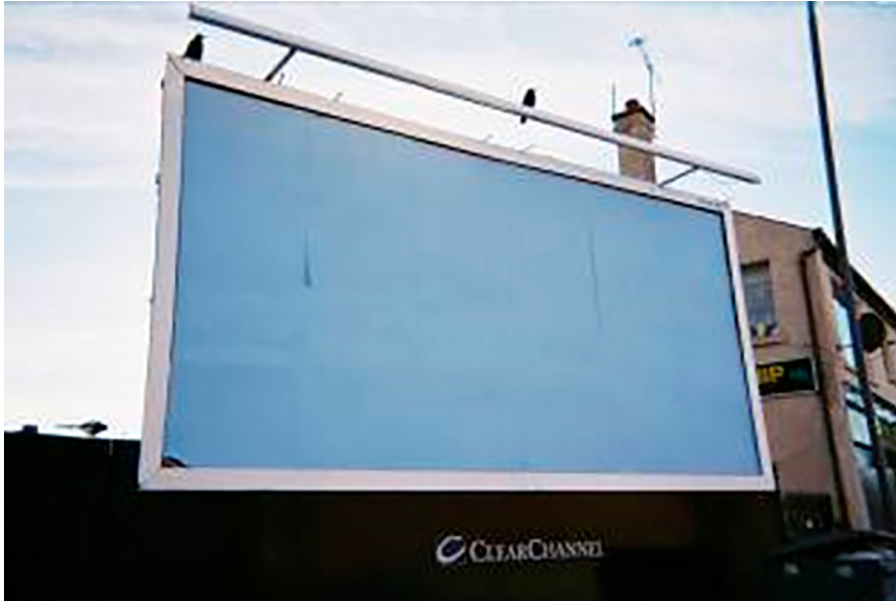
Bruce's interpretation of this sign was far less emotional than the other participants' contributions on the previously discussed signs, as there appears to be no discrepancy between what the sign clearly represents and what transpired at the site, as the Forth Valley College was built; hence, the transparent physical promise of the sign was fulfilled.

### Advertisement billboards

Billboards were another semiotic inscription within the landscape, which the participants photographed. Bruce considered this billboard in context with its environment and saw its emptiness as a reflection of an optimistic vision offered by the regeneration:

I just loved it I just love it it was blank the imagery for for a regeneration area ehm you could put anything there you know you could be anything for it you know.

(Bruce 30s)



Bruce (2012) *Untitled*.

Emily in contrast interpreted the billboards negatively with grass overgrowing underneath and paint peeling alongside the fact that it does not seem to be congruent with improving the area, as her comment shows:

... I really don't like and I always like the ground underneath always need maintained or you know it's like right over near enough across from the schools you understand the road just a tiny bit it's just the same like to try to you know make an area better that's one thing they could get rid of or ban or whatever I don't know even how you would do that or who owns it or whatever built something in the spaces obviously there are two big advertisements and half the time they don't have things on them its all peeling off as well.

(Emily 20s)



Emily (2012) *Untitled*.



Emily (2012) *Untitled*.

This shows how the semiotics of the billboard were understood fundamentally differently by Bruce and Emily (Eco 1997). Bruce saw the blank space as a metaphor for a new start within Raploch, through the regeneration, but also in terms of his move into the area. Therefore, he considered the empty, blank space as one which allows for the development of new possibilities. By contrast, Emily refers to the shabbiness of the billboards, as well as their emptiness, which she feels semiotically conveys a lack of care and quality within the neighbourhood. In examining stigmatised communities Cronin

(2010) also interprets such vacant billboards negatively (2010, 147), in that they can be seen as “a visual symbol of the ghettos.” Cronin (2010) further adds that the empty billboards are an indication that the area of their location is not economically vibrant, as these advertising spaces cannot be successfully sold to companies by the agencies that lease them. Therefore, billboards also need to be understood in terms of the “social spatial dialectic,” which, given that Raploch has a history of deprivation and stigmatisation, in this context adds to the negative social discourse of Raploch, or, as Wacquant (2007) describes it, territorial stigmatisation. It should be also highlighted that Bruce was a newcomer to the area and had bought a property whereas Emily despite having bought a house in the area had a long and historical connection to the area where she had grown up.

### Graffitiists

Various participants made photos of graffiti within the area, especially that on the building in the first photograph below. Primarily, graffiti was seen as vandalism. Emily, who made this photo, commented:

*“... one area I really hate I just dislike because it is always kind of graffiti and the roads need tarred.”*

(Emily 20s)



Emily (2012) *Untitled*.

Thus, her comments resonate with the general discourse of graffiti, which is seen as “out of place” in public spaces and conveying a general sense of disobedience and disorder (Cresswell 1996). Hence, this graffiti can be seen as visually encouraging stigmatisation, as well as criminal stereotyping within an area (Wilson and Kelling 1982). This is particularly relevant considering the long history of stigmatisation this area has

experienced; therefore, the graffiti can be seen as a visual reminder of Raploch's long history of being a sink estate encouraging territorial stigmatisation (Wacquant 2007)

Ciaran also saw the graffiti in Raploch in terms of vandalism, but he suggests that he appreciated graffiti as art within a different context, therefore, highlighting the significance of the social-spatial context of the inscription:

I'm quite a fan of the graffiti artist Banksy who operates all over the world but particularly in southern England. And we don't really see any of that in Raploch and I'd quite like to see that but what we have instead is rather ... Neanderthal um ... scrawlings so um ...

(Ciaran 30s)



Ciaran (2012) *God Save The Queen: IRA Graffiti on a Small Pillar Box Under Stirling Castle*.

This resonates with Cresswell (1996) who argued that graffiti could be acceptable, depending on their context. Therefore, graffiti by Banksy is acceptable and considered as art, especially when removed from its urban context, framed, and sold at an art auction in London for £750,000, whereby writing on a wall in a housing estate is seen as "Neanderthal" (Huffington Post 2013).

Only one participant, Ciaran, also considered the explicit linguistic meaning of the graffiti:

Um ... you can see somebody has scrawled on the side IRA which stands for the Irish Republic Army, which was you know um ... the paramilitary organisation of the independence movement in Northern Ireland. I thought that had all kind of blown over somehow but uh ... apparently its alive and kicking in Raploch. And you can see other ... I dunno if you can see on the wall. I may have taken pictures elsewhere but people have scrawled FTQ or fuck the queen so ... this kind of republican anti monarchist sentiment is being aired there by the um ... I always like graffiti, I don't really like that particularly because its not ... you know its not really I don't think but uh ... you know?"



(Ciaran 30s)

This observation resonates with Massey (1993), who found IRA graffiti in Kilburn High Road, London. She considered this linguistic landscape as part of the place identity of this area, which also had a historical Irish background. Therefore, it could be argued that the graffiti allowed the graffiti writers to express their group identity, which in the case of Raploch can be seen as part of a religious, as well as Irish identity, as previous research has pointed out (Robertson, Smyth, and McIntosh 2008a). Ciaran also considered this form of graffiti as a “*very low protest*”, which he elaborated on in the highly descriptive and lengthy title that he gave to the photo:

The area retains a large Irish Catholic community, some of whom evidently enjoy defacing its street furniture with sectarian slogans such as ‘Fuck the Queen’. It’s like stepping back 20 years, or 200.

(Ciaran 30s)

Therefore, the linguistic discourse, in the form of graffiti, arguably highlighted aspects of sectarian tension within the area. Conversely, Daniel, even though he took a photo with a visible IRA graffiti, did not refer to this in the interview, but rather spoke about the Protestant School which was formerly located on this plot of land:

This is the site of the old school which housed the Protestant school on this plot and I didn’t get a good enough photo but to the right of that on the same road was the Catholic school.

(Daniel 30s)



Daniel (2012) *Housing*.

Therefore, this territory had a particular place identity, because it had housed the Protestant school. As such the IRA graffiti could be viewed as a direct response to this place



identity. This graffiti could be interpreted as compensating for the original meaning of this place, which had previously been occupied by the Protestant school. In other words, these graffiti can be seen as a form of territorial invasion, and therefore reflects the religious rivalry within the area. Similarly, the utilisation of sectarian graffiti as a territorial marker was found in a study in Glasgow, which recorded a significantly higher amount of sectarian than racist graffiti (Ellaway, Bradby, and Mckeown 2002).

## Conclusion

The participants' interpretations and the focus on the linguistic landscape was an unexpected yet significant aspect of the participants' perceptions of the area. These visual markers were considered as part of a social discourse within the community as well as the wider society's discourse with the neighbourhood.

The discrepancy between the official signs, the promises they conveyed, and the reality on the ground in Raploch, created an emotional response since they were considered impenetrable and insincere. These signs also need to be viewed in the context of both, historically unfulfilled promises, such as those discovered by Pollock and Sharp (2012), and the unequal relationship between people in the area and powerful urban actors.

Linguistic markers, such as the empty and neglected billboards and the graffiti, are interpreted as a visual representation of a territorial stigmatisation (Wacquant 2007), which persists despite the regeneration process. Simultaneously, the graffiti, as a group identity marker, also visually reinforces the previous finding of religious rivalry in the area. Therefore, graffiti in Raploch is used as a form of communication between, and territorial markers of, different group identities, such as Roman Catholic and Protestant.

In conclusion, these semiotic and linguistic landscapes are a representation of the power relationships, as well as symbols of stigmatisation and rivalry, that exist both within the area, and between the area and the wider society.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Iris Altenberger** is a lecturer in the School of Applied Social Studies at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen. Her primary research interest is in urban sociology, migration, environmental social work as well as visual and art-based research methodologies.

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