

Migration and Meaning-Making in a Plurilingual Urban Landscape

Outside an elementary school, a sturdy plastic sign directs morning traffic with large blue arrows and text in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Urdu. A Rohingya man bypasses the Korean red bean bread in the Chin grocery store, heading straight for the homemade fried coconut snacks while chatting up the proprietor in Burmese.

Scenes such as these are common in this famously international Chicago neighborhood, displaying how the linguistic landscape (LL) reflects residents' home language literacies, unique needs, assets, and level of community integration (Moll et al. 1992; Short & Boyson 2012; Vieira, 2016; Brooks 2017; Fishman, 2021; Author, 2023). This study expands previous research to include responses to the LL from members of the target audiences who navigate the landscape every day. Participants from immigrant/ migrant/ refugee groups are shown ten photos illustrating a variety of neighborhood contexts (Blommaert, 2013), including school, library, ethnic businesses, festival booth, and non-profit agencies, and asked four questions about the purpose of the sign and the feelings evoked.

Preliminary results indicate differing orientations toward the salience and meaning of a sign based on participants' ability to read and engage with the sign, even when it is not targeted toward that reader. In one example, participants were shown a photo of the front of a tutoring center for children in refugee families. The text on the marquee is in English and Burmese; flags from Venezuela and Ukraine hang in one window. When asked who this place was for, the respondents had different takes. The Urdu-Hindi-English-speaking asylum-seeker from India said, "Students," the Venezuelan Spanish-dominant asylum seeker said, "To help those in need," and the Dari-Pashto-English-speaking Afghan refugee who tutors there said, "This is for me, for my kids, for other, you know, refugees, asylum seekers from all over the world." Another photo shows a wall inside a shelter housing Venezuelan migrants; the Indian and Afghan respondents, seeing English/ Spanish translations, assume it is an ESL class. The Venezuelan recognizes the shelter where she lived for months and notes, "It brings back memories." While these participants were all able to recognize that the signs were in Spanish and English, meaning-making is based very much on their own lived experiences here in Chicago.

This study adds to the canon of LL research by including a variety of responses to texts targeted toward members of different immigrant communities, but encountered by non-members as well. It aims to uncover and amplify hyperlocal perspectives often obscured or erased by those of the researcher.