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Economy in Linguistic Landscape: A Study of Public Signboards

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Abstract

Economy in language has a strong controlling function over the whole system, something which is carried out with the least possible cost in terms of energy. The concept of economy- a tenet or tendency shared by all living organisms may be referred to as 'the principle of least effort', which consists of the objective of the use of minimum amount of effort that is necessary to achieve the maximum results. This principle operates in linguistic behavior at the very core of linguistic evolution. The aim of this paper is to highlight the role of economy in linguistic landscape in the theoretical framework of Columbia School of Linguistics also known as Form Content Linguistics. The theoretical basis of the theory of Form Content Linguistics (Columbia School of Linguistics) is a chain of scholarly descent from Ferdenand de Saussure and Andre Martinet. It started from Prague School and reached to the Columbia School of Linguistics under the steward leadership of Prof. William Diver who reared and nurtured this theory at Columbia University through further research.

Keywords: Economy, Language, Linguistic Landscape, Form Content Linguistics.

Introduction

No matter where we are in the world today, language surrounds us everywhere we look. We can have it in the flashy advertisements or the commercials; it may appear in the form of the names of buildings, streets, and shops, and we can also find it as instructions, warnings or in a number of other ways. The predominance of visual information has increased the use of signs than ever before. The highest density of signs can be found in cities and towns, particularly at main shopping streets, industrial areas, airports, public transports etc. It is seen that people prefer sign vocabulary to natural language.

In linguistic science, the 'economy principle' is currently an accepted term that can have lots of different values and meanings. Economy Principle is also called 'the principle of least effort'. "Economy", as a tendency, is shared by all living organisms. The cause of it is said to be the 'idleness', one of the inherent traits of human being. The word 'economy' reveals various interpretations such as 'gain', 'thrift', 'less burden', etc. One of the meanings of the word 'economy' may be 'to be careful on spending'. Language processes are also affected by economic processes and vice versa.

Literature Review

The notable linguist Whitney acknowledged the role of economy principle in language changes and came to a conclusion that humans always try "to make things easy to our organs of speech, to economize time and effort in the work of expression" (Whitney,1877:345). Another important

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figure is H. Sweet, who talked about the two principles of economy in phonology: “a) dropping of superfluous sounds; b) ease of translation from one sound to another, which leads to convergence and assimilation...” (Sweet, 1888:156). An American linguist, named Werner Leopold, argued that any linguistic system contains two types of contradictory tendencies: “linguistic development follows not one tendency, but two opposing ones: towards distinctness and towards economy. Either of these poles prevails, but both are present and alternately preponderant” (Leopold,1930:102).

The Economy Principle in Columbia School Linguistics

‘Economy’ is a subset of ‘Human Behavior’, one of the five orienting principles in Columbia School Linguistics, also known as Form Content Linguistics. The foundation of Form Content Linguistics was laid by William Diver in the 2nd half of the 20th century. Diver was an innovator in the introduction of ‘Human Behavior’ in analyzing the structure and functioning of language[1], which became a cornerstone in his theory. Diver draws a picture claiming that linguistic knowledge cannot be said to be different from other types of knowledge acquired by human being; in the same way, linguistic behavior cannot be said to be different from that of ordinary human behavior (Huffman, 2011). Laziness being one of the inherent human traits seeks to ‘minimax solution’ between accomplishment and efforts, tending towards the minimum amount of effort that is necessary for gaining maximum result, so that nothing is wasted. Indolence, one of the inherent attributes of human being, pursues the economy principle with the same objective in all activities, carried out most efficiently with least possible cost in terms of energy.

It was Andre Martinet, who is considered to be an important figure in the development of economy principle, though there were scholars before him who talked about it but in other disciplines and not in the field of language. In 1864, Friedrick Max Muller, a German philologist, also raised his theories about the economy principle in language, “all the developments that are the result of phonetic alternations have a physiological explanation following the general principle of simplification, also known as the economy forcing principle or the principle of “least effort”. By this view, users are inclined to economize the resources and tools for achieving communication successfully, Martinet named it the least effort for a particular purpose.

On The Notion of Linguistic Landscape

i. Etymology

The dictionary meaning of the word ‘landscape’ refers to ‘a piece of scenery as well as to the genre of art dealing with the depiction of natural scenery’. The use of the word ‘landscape’ was first recorded in English in 1598. It is a loan word in English language; it has been taken from Dutch, where the term was being used by the painters, who were getting fame for their skills in the landscape genre. The word ‘landscape’ in the Dutch originally means ‘region’ or ‘tract of land’, but 16th century brought an artistic significance to the word then it began to use as ‘picture depictinga scenery on land’. In Germanic languages, the word for landscape is similar: in German it is ‘landschaft’, in Danish, ‘landskab’ and in Norwegian and Swedish, the word is ‘landskap’ (Gorter,2006: 82,83).

ii. The Linguistic Landscape

[1] The idea of human factor is also found in Zipf (1949), but Zipf applied it in limited ways, didn’t present a comprehensive linguistic theory dealing with human factor.

"Linguistic Landscape, indeed constitutes the very scene-made of streets, corners, circuses, parks, buildings- where society's public life takes place. As such this scene carries crucial sociosymbolic importance as it actually identifies- and thus serves as the emblem of societies, communities and region" (Ban-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara and Trumper-Hecht, 2006). Linguistic Landscape is found everywhere, open to all, comprising the text to disseminate information, directions, warnings and messages etc. These texts are written in the dominant language or the languages of that particular community, where these landscapes are being used. These signs are used to indicate direction on how to get to a place, as in the case of guidance signs, or simply call attention to it, as advertisement signs do. The study of these texts is referred to as 'Linguistic Landscape'. Ban-Rafael et.al. (2006:14) define linguistic landscape as "any sign announcement located outside or inside a public institution or a private business in a given geographical location". In the same token, Gorter (2006:2) holds the view about linguistic landscape as "the use of language in its written form in public sphere". Numerous signs speak to us daily in the public space. Residential areas consist of street signs, name plates or texts on mailboxes, while in commercial areas, we find an abundance of signs.

Linguistic Landscape as an area of study is a relatively new area, drawn from several academic disciplines, namely, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology and cultural geography. The notion of linguistic landscape, for the very first time, was introduced by Landry and Bourhis in 1997 in a published paper. They defined it as, "… The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs and public signs on government buildings combine to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration". In 2008, Shohamy and Gorter widened the scope of the definition by including "language in the environment, words and images displayed and exposed in public spaces, that is the center of attention in this rapidly growing area referred to as Linguistic Landscape (LL)".

Motives for Linguistic Landscape

To entertain: advertisements, quotations etc.
To instruct: warnings, traffic signs, signs of street names etc.
To spread news: announcements, notices etc.
To carry on business and other co-operative enterprises: shop signs, private business sign etc.

Aims and Objective

The framework of this paper has been prepared by having following objectives in mind:
To examine the use of language displayed and exposed in public spaces from an economic perspective.
To show how messages are being conveyed by an economic use of language.
To talk about how people tend towards 'minimax solution'.
To look at the embodiment of the economy principle in public sign boards.

Methodology

When we are dealing with linguistic landscape, it is to be kept in mind that the field of linguistic landscape relies on photography and visual analysis. That is the reason why the core data of this study was gathered through photography method. The recent developments in the field of digital camera technology made it possible to capture a number of photographs at a relatively low cost. Cell phone cameras have also added another dimension to it.

For the present study around two hundred (200) photographs were taken from different public places such as malls, street signs, restaurant, shops etc. After collecting enough data for the

study, the next task was to analyze them from an economical point of view that is purely associated with the human factor.

Findings

During the collection and analysis of the data we came across certain interesting results that are provided below.

Use of 'Sign Language'

It is seen that linguistic landscape prefers the use of Signs (symbols, icons and indexes) for conveying a message to the masses such as 'the traffic system'. The use of these signs can be seen throughout the linguistic landscape to serve different purposes. Being economic, these signs also serve the purpose of being attractive; it is seen that the landscapes having only written material are considered to be boring than those of having attractive images (Hashmi and Mohsin, 2017: 61-68).

The figures 1, 2 and 3 have been given in support of this point. These figures support the view that 'economy' is fundamental in linguistic landscape, for instance, in place of writing the whole story like 'capturing pictures is prohibited in this particular place'; one simple icon (see figure-1) is preferred. Similarly, the figures like 2 and 3 depict a complete story in themselves. Thus, we find that signs have an ability to produce an economic benefit which is very difficult to achieve in case of a hand written note stuck on the wall.

Figure-1

Figure- 2

Figure- 3

Domination of Content Words

While analyzing the data it was noticed that there was a dominance of content words, while the use of function words is avoided. The reason for this may lies in the fact that, for conveying a message, content words are mandatory and the lack of the use of function words can make the decoder understand about the whole idea. If the same purpose can be served by the economic use of language (i.e. by avoiding function words), what is the fun to waste more time and energy. It is perfectly shown in the figures 4, 5, 6 & 7 that how there is a dominance of content words in Linguistic Landscape.

Figure- 4 Figure- 5

Figure- 6 Figure- 7

Use of Abbreviations and Short Forms

No one can deny the fact that the use of abbreviations and short forms saves a lot of time and energy. It is due to this reason that Linguistic Landscape prefers the use of these abbreviations and the short forms. The words 'minute', 'yards', 'meter' etc. are always used in their short forms as 'min', 'yds', 'mtr' etc. Similarly, the phrases like 'meters per second', kilometer per hour' etc. are very frequent in case of road signs and it is seen that most of the time these are used in the form of abbreviations such as 'mps', 'kmph' etc. The Linguistic Landscape is full of these kinds of forms. Figures like 8, 9 and 10 are being given in support of this point. These figures depict well that how these abbreviations and the shorter forms of the words and phrases are prevalent in Linguistic Landscape.

Figure- 8

Figure- 9

Figure- 10

Conclusion

The present analysis of the public signage (Linguistic Landscape) is based on the assumption that the field of Linguistic Landscape prefers an economic use of language; as a result humans save their time and energy. There is a lot of gap but humans are still able to successfully get their message across the decoder. Thus, it can be said that humans are endowed with a number of traits out of which laziness and intelligence together pave the path for economy and inference.

It needs to be highlighted here that due to the lack of access to the pictures, an important and relevant point could not be added to the main paper; that is the use of 'ka' and 'ki' forms to refer to the 'washrooms for male' and the 'washrooms for female' respectively ['ka'- washroom for

males and 'ki'- washroom for female]. These forms were found at the sign-boards of the washrooms of multiplex cinema in Great Value Mall located in Aligarh city.

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