

# Linguistic landscape in film works and video games

*Krajobraz językowy w utworach filmowych i grach wideo*

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**Abstract:** Linguistic landscape studies can yield information about the society inhabiting the given area: the use and distribution of languages, but also social structure and hierarchy of linguistic groups. For these reasons, the linguistic landscape can be used in artworks to convey information regarding the fictional reality to the recipient. This paper aims to analyse what functions the linguistic landscape can perform in film works and video games, and how certain aspects of fictional realities are portrayed through the intentional use of linguistic landscapes.

**Keywords:** linguistic landscape, film works, video games

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# 1. The concept of linguistic landscape

The linguistic landscape is a relatively new field of study. It is relevant not only in linguistics but also in numerous other disciplines connected with social and political spheres of human life, such as sociology, political science, architecture, economy, and geography (Shohamy, 2009).

Although the relevance of the language used in public space was noticed earlier, for example, by Elizabeth Nadel et al. (1977) or Bernard Spolsky and Robert L. Cooper (1991) in their studies of language use in Jerusalem, the very term “linguistic” landscape was first used in 1997 by Rodrigue Landry and Richard Y. Bourhis. They defined the linguistic landscape as “[T]he visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region” (Landry and Bourhis, 1997, p. 23).

Similarly general definitions have been formed by various other researchers, for example Elana Shohamy, who defines the linguistic landscape as “language items that are displayed in a variety of contexts in the environment” (2006, p. 112), or Florian Coulmas: “the study of writing on display in the public sphere” (2009, p. 14). Other scholars who propose such conceptualizations include Peter Backhaus (2006) or Eliezer Ben-Rafael (2009). While the definitions differ in certain aspects, there is a general agreement that the linguistic landscape covers the entirety of language visible in the public space of the given area of research.

Numerous scholars note the importance of linguistic landscape studies and what it contributes not only to linguistics but also other disciplines. Landry and Bourhis (1997) note that the linguistic landscape can yield information on the society inhabiting the given area of research – not only regarding the use and distribution of language, but also the social structure and hierarchy, and the level of influence of individual groups.

Similar claims on learning about society from the linguistic landscape have been made by Eliezer Ben-Rafael (2009) and by Ben-Rafael et al. in their study of the linguistic landscape in Israel (2006). Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorter (2009) also agree with the idea – they present the linguistic landscape as an “important indicator capable of providing relevant information about societies, vitality and the inter-relationship of groups, especially in linguistic contested regions” (Shohamy, 2009, p. 2) and claim that the goal of its study is “to understand the system, the messages

it delivers or could deliver, about societies, people, the economy, policy, class, identities, multilingualism, multimodalities, forms of representation and additional phenomena” (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009, p. 3).

In addition, Durk Gorter suggests that from linguistic landscape study, one could learn about the historical changes in social, cultural and political situation of a given region (Gorter, 2006, 2013). This idea has also been proposed by Ben-Rafael (2009), who claims that, in the case of most areas, the linguistic landscape yields information about the historical events and tendencies that occurred there.

Linguistic landscape studies is a field where new developments are still being made, and scholars find new points of relevance and uses of the concept in other fields, also outside the scope of linguistics, or humanities in general. To name a few examples, Connor Malloy (2022) examines how the linguistic landscape can affect human psychology, Yu Li et al. (2022) suggest its potential use in pedagogy, and Durk Gorter (2018) argues that linguistic landscape studies can tie in with the advancements in computer technology.

The knowledge of the mentioned purposes and the type of information a linguistic landscape study can yield is also applicable in its analysis in artistic works. This regards the artists’ use of the linguistic landscape in shaping a represented world and the overall narration of the literary or film work. For this purpose, both linguistic and non-linguistic elements of signs can be utilised. The linguistic elements that may support this aspect of the given work include the language distribution within the text visible in signs, formal or informal tone, or grammatical mood. The non-linguistic elements may include any visual characteristics of the given sign, such as the shape, size, color, and brightness, as well as the position of the sign in relation to its surroundings.

## **2. Linguistic landscape in film works**

Bruce Block (2020) names the visuals as one of the three basic components of a film work, along with sound and story. He also explains that the visual aspect of a movie can be used to express certain emotions and ideas. As the linguistic landscape is exclusively connected to the visual sphere, it often performs relevant functions in film works.

## 2.1 *Blade Runner* (1982)

*Blade Runner* is a science fiction movie directed by Ridley Scott and released in 1982, partially based on the novel *Do androids dream of electric sheep?* by Philip K. Dick. It is considered to be a major influence for modern science fiction film while also incorporating elements of film noir and detective fiction (Bukatman, 2012; Hyden, 2018). The film explores numerous themes and issues typical for contemporary fiction such as the technological advancements and economic changes that took place in the United States at the time.

The movie is one of the first and most influential works in the subgenre of science fiction called cyberpunk (Csicsery-Ronay, 1988; Bukatman, 2012; Hyden, 2018). One of the distinguishing characteristics of the subgenre is its visual aspect, in particular the urban landscapes. The portrayal of the futuristic city in *Blade Runner* is one of its prominent features that has been referenced or imitated in numerous later works of the subgenre (Bukatman, 2012; Hyden, 2018).

One of the key elements of this aesthetic is the prevalence of bright neon signs, especially advertisement signs visible throughout the city. They are the most prominent elements of the cityscape and make up a large percent of all linguistic signs in the film. Advertisements are often shown through electronic displays, enormous bright screens, or neon signs, but also in more traditional forms. In most cases, they are very prominent and easily discernible from the rest of the scenery. Many are of a large size and consist of bright, saturated colours, as opposed to the rest of scenery, which is dominated by dark, mostly monochrome hues. As such, advertisements are very noticeable and stand out, even when remaining solely in the background and out of focus. This design of linguistic signs, along with their ubiquitous nature, is a crucial element of the characteristic aesthetic of the urban landscape in the movie, described by Hyden (2018) and Bukatman (2012). This example demonstrates that the linguistic landscape can be used as a part of visual design. As film is a dominantly visual medium, this is an important role for the work as a whole.

Apart from the visuals, the prevalence of these commercial signs also has its function in the narration as it supports the message of the film regarding the aggressive nature of future capitalistic society. Sage Hyden

(2018) sees such an expansive portrayal of advertisements as a form of expression of fear of what the socioeconomic policies introduced during Ronald Reagan's presidency could lead to, especially paired with the rapid technological advancements of the time. According to Hyden, the ubiquity of advertisements represents how corporate capitalism rules everyday lives of its inhabitants. As such, linguistic landscape provides the recipient with certain information on the fictional reality and the society that inhabits it, thus becoming an instrument of narration. In addition, some advertisements feature real-world names such as Coca-Cola, Budweiser, or Atari. This measure reinforces the connection of the fictional world to the reality and supports the illusion that the world of *Blade Runner* is an extrapolation of our own.

Aside from the socioeconomic commentary of the film, Carlen Lavigne (2013) names the process of globalisation and mass migrations as an important theme of *Blade Runner*, and also cyberpunk in general. In the film, the aspect of globalisation and culture mixing is abundantly expressed by the language distribution that can be observed throughout the city. Aside from English, numerous foreign languages appear on many signs, for example, Russian or Spanish, which are the languages of Los Angeles minorities. However, the dominant language family visible in the linguistic landscape of the film is Asian, in particular Chinese and Japanese. They are used in signs of various functionality, including the dominantly informative signs, as well as the expressive (for example, writings on walls expressing disdain for other national groups) and persuasive (commercial signs, advertisements). Robert Cumbow (2000) also notes that such clear representation of Asian cultures in the futuristic USA in *Blade Runner* is an intentional expression of thoughts on the sociocultural situation and trends of the contemporary world. Such portrayal could be an expression of what contemporary real-world social processes could lead to or a simple prediction of the future based on observations of the reality.

Linguistic landscape is an important element in *Blade Runner*, serving not only as a decorative part of the scenery, which gives the movie the distinct aesthetic, but also bearing relevant information on the plot and the fictional world portrayed in the movie. The linguistic signs that appear on the screen can be seen to have been intentionally presented to reflect on certain aspects on the portrayed society and the vision of the

future, and they provide additional information that complement what the recipients learn through more direct means.

### 3. Linguistic landscape in video games

Modern video games usually follow similar principles as films in the aspects of visual design and narration. However, they also include an aspect that is absent in film works, namely interactivity, which is to be taken into account when designing a game, also including the use of its linguistic landscape.

#### 3.1 *Deus Ex* (2000)

*Deus Ex* is a video game directed by Warren Spector, released in the year 2000. The story takes place in the year 2052 and depicts a dystopic vision of the future society where global corporations and political groups have amassed an enormous amount of power over the world and vast differences between social and economic classes exist. In *Deus Ex*, numerous aspects of social and political life are being discussed and the narration touches upon such issues as economic policies, overly centralised political power, and rapid technological advancement.

One of the most predominant characteristics of the society portrayed in *Deus Ex* is the aspect of globalization. Travel between different parts of the world is relatively quick and easy, and people of various national and cultural descents mix in many areas. English functions as a universal language of the world and most people can communicate in it, even in geographically and culturally distant parts of the globe. Even those from lower socioeconomic classes, who often struggle with lack of education, can understand and speak English besides their mother tongues. In the story, it is explained that there are continuous efforts being made to unify all people in the spheres of culture and language.

This unification is also represented through the linguistic landscape in numerous instances in the story. In the scenes that take place in Hong Kong, which are particularly abundant in linguistic signs, the majority of the signs include text in both Chinese and English, or solely in English, which is a significant increase of this language's usage in comparison

to the real-world situation in Hong Kong at the time. In comparison, a later part of the game takes place in France where the situation is much different: linguistic signs appear almost solely in French, with no elements in other languages. This contrast can be explained both by narrative measures (in the world of *Deus Ex*, France is ruled by a strong authoritarian government that strictly controls the country's economic and civil spheres, while in Hong Kong the authorities are not as involved) and reality extrapolations (English is already known and in use by certain groups in Hong Kong, whereas strict linguistic policies have been introduced in France with the aim of preserving the national language). As such, the linguistic landscape again functions as a tool to portray certain aspects of these parts of the universe and their social and political situations.

The linguistic landscape is also an element of the visual design of the game. In Hong Kong, the linguistic landscape features a striking abundance of colourful neon signs, electronic displays, and all sorts of commercial signs, which contribute to the characteristic feeling of the place – it was intended to be portrayed as a busy, lively city, also referencing some elements of Eastern Asian cultures. In the portion of the game that takes place in France, the situation is much different. According to the story, shortly before the events of the game, a series of riots broke out in the country and as a result, a police curfew was introduced in Paris. Citizens are not allowed outside during the night and the streets are patrolled by a paramilitary personnel ready to shoot even unarmed citizens on sight. This location in the game was meant to feel lonely and dangerous, pointing at the difficulty of the political situation and the menace connected to the story's antagonists. The visual design of the linguistic landscape in the city adds to this feeling: compared to that of Hong Kong, linguistic landscape in Paris is rather scarce, consisting mostly of occasional storefront signs or informational posters. Unlike the bright neon signs and electronic displays that are ubiquitous in Hong Kong, the signs in France are simple, usually have muted colours, and are often visibly old and weathered, with not many commercial signs either. Such portrayal of the linguistic landscape adds to the desolate atmosphere of the location. These two contrasting examples show how linguistic landscape can



be used to achieve different visual design in different locations and evoke certain feelings through the visuals of the given place.

Aside from the two functions of the linguistic landscape that were also present in film works, information source and element of visual design, there is another function connected to the interactive nature of the video game medium. The player in *Deus Ex* is free to roam the game world and has a large degree of freedom in exploring the environment. Because of this, it becomes crucial from the game design perspective that the player's actions are subtly guided in the right direction by various elements of the world. The linguistic landscape is one of the most commonly used instruments in this aspect: it works to aid the player in their exploration. The player is often told to go to certain places in order to progress the story, and linguistic signs are used to help them orientate themselves and find their way.

For example, in Hong Kong, the signs pointing the right way to the given places are usually bright electronic signs, often contrasted with the dim background. They are designed that way to be easily noticeable by the player. A similar design can be seen in Paris: among the gray unobtrusive signs that create its linguistic landscape, the only bright, colorful sign spells the name of a nightclub La Porte de l'Enfer, a place that the player is earlier told to go to, while the rest of linguistic signs, which function primarily as a decor, are usually bleak and weathered. The linguistic content of these signs also often contributes to this function. The signs that are relevant to the gameplay aspect are either monolingual English or include the English text as the most prominent in order to avoid confusion on part of the player, as the target audience of the game are English-speaking recipients.

### **3.2 *Fallout 3* (2008)**

*Fallout 3* is the third installment in the main *Fallout* series. It depicts a vision of the future in which the world has been destroyed by a nuclear war that broke out in the year 2077. Some people managed to survive the apocalypse in enormous underground vaults that had been sealed right before the war. The following generations were born and lived in them, without ever having seen the outside world. The player character belongs

to one of those generations, but at one point, they leave the vault and get to explore the outside world.

One of the foci of the narrative design of *Fallout 3* is its environmental storytelling. The game keenly utilises the linguistic landscape to convey certain themes in various areas. The introductory portion of the game takes place inside the vault which is run by an authoritarian leader called the Overseer. Lives of the vault dwellers are strictly controlled in many areas, freedom of speech is limited, and the authorities do not hesitate to violently exercise their power over those who do not follow the rules. The linguistic landscape of the vault adds to the dystopian feeling that the narration aims to achieve. Inside the vault, the linguistic landscape consists to a large degree of propaganda posters made by the authorities that command the citizens to comply and live according to the rules, dedicate themselves to work, marry and raise many children, and never criticize those in power. The posters use the imperative mode and address the recipients directly, and the language they use is concise to keep the messages short. The signs are designed to fulfill solely the persuasive function. It can also be noted that the linguistic landscape of the vault is purely monolingual, which may point to the homogeneity of the dwellers. From observing these signs, along with other elements of narration, the player can learn about the sociopolitical situation in the vault, which also rationalizes the protagonist's motivation to escape the place later in the story. At one point in the game, a revolt breaks out in the vault, and the citizens' rebellion is also shown through linguistic signs, namely hand-painted derogatory slogans on the walls targeted at the Overseer.

On the other hand, the main portion of the game takes place outside the vault, in post-war ruins of the capital city, Washington. Throughout the city, an abundance of linguistic signs can be seen, most of them being old weathered signs and posters from the time before the war. From these, the player can learn more about the pre-war social, economic, and political situation of the United States. While pre-war signs in the previous *Fallout* games mostly referenced the 1980s and 1990s popular culture, the ones in *Fallout 3* stand as a part of the narration of the game as they are a form of satire aimed at the 1940s and 1950s Americana. Among the signs, there are many advertisements of junk food and vanity products, but the most prevalent are propaganda posters encouraging the people

of the USA to support their country and the army at any cost, at the same time depicting the enemy, China, as an irredeemable incarnation of evil.

Although the characteristics of the linguistic landscape differ largely between the inside of the vault and the outside world, certain points of similarity in their linguistic elements can be seen. In both cases, linguistic signs are mostly persuasive rather than informative, and aim to evoke a certain reaction from their recipients. The prewar posters are similarly monolingual, which portrays the social structure of the United States from before the war, although examples of signs in Chinese can be found in certain distinct places, which shows that the military adversaries were present in the country and also using propaganda for their goals. From these posters, the player can learn more about the world before the war – the political tensions, the civil unrest, but also some aspects of social and economic life. For example, some of the advertisement signs show absurdly high prices of the products, reflecting the miserable economic situation of the country and soaring inflation which had been one of the factors that had led to the war in the first place. This way, linguistic landscape conveys information on the fictional reality to the player, giving them a better understanding of its story, and a better perspective on the themes of the game.

The linguistic landscape is also an element of the visual design of the game world. The pre-war signs that appear in the city ruins are faded, weathered, and often barely readable due to their condition. Signs on metallic surfaces, like subway station names, storefront signs, or street signs, are covered in rust and often partially salvaged, whereas many paper posters are worn out to the point of incomprehensibility. On the other hand, new linguistic signs, made by the new settlers of the wasteland, are often simple and improvised, made of junk or scrapes and paint, reflecting the struggle of living in the post-war world. As such, the linguistic landscape of the game world adds to the desolate feeling of the inhospitable post-apocalyptic world that was destroyed by a nuclear war and still has not recovered. The visuals of the outside world contrast with the inside of the vault where signs and posters are in good condition and visibly taken care of, which creates a clean and sterile feeling of the place.

The guiding function of the linguistic landscape is also present in the game. *Fallout 3* is an open-world game, giving the player a high degree

of freedom in their exploration. To help them find the key locations, linguistic signs were designed. Unlike the map and the compass, which are parts of the user interface, these signs are physical entities in the game world and they make sense within their environment – they can be, for example, crudely made road signs pointing at a new settlement, or simply a writing on a wall with a directional arrow on the side. In addition, signs designating places of interest are big and positioned in a way that makes them easily noticeable, even from afar. These types of signs are particularly abundant in vaults which are mostly composed of corridors and staircases, with somewhat maze-like designs. The signs describing the specific rooms and giving directions to various places not only make sense from the worldbuilding perspective but also aid the player in navigating these areas.

## 4. Conclusions

The linguistic landscape is often a relevant part of fictional works and can be intentionally used by the authors to perform certain functions.

In the case of film works, two commonly used functions of the linguistic landscape can be distinguished. The first is being an information source for the viewer. When the recipient is presented with a fictional world, narration and other elements of the given work have to introduce them to any novel concepts that they will encounter in order to make the story understandable. The linguistic landscape can be an effective tool for that as it can provide various knowledge about the world and also the society inhabiting it, since linguistic signs are connected to the people who create them and live with them. As such, the linguistic landscape can be used by filmmakers in conveying the desired themes and evoking intended reactions in the recipients (e.g. in science fiction works). This can be done not only through the linguistic elements of the signs, but also through other aspects such as their visual appearance and positioning in the film world's environment.

Aside from that, the linguistic landscape be a relevant part of the scenery of the given work and contribute to its individual aesthetics. The works analysed in the paper represent dominantly visual types of media.

Visuals are an important element of such works and it can be recognized that linguistic signs, their graphical form, localization, and contexts can contribute extensively to the overall look of the given work. In the case of film works, these signs often become part of their identity and influence their overall reception.

While video games share the visual dominance of the previous medium, the linguistic landscape in them has an additional function: it can be used in the design of the game world in order to aid the player in their exploration and guide them to progress in the game. This function is exclusive to games as it emerges directly from the interactive nature of the medium. In this aspect, again, both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of linguistic signs are used. The language used and the length of the text on the given sign can be intended to draw the player's attention and give information that the intended audience will understand. The visual appearance and positioning of signs perform a similar function. A large, bright, and well-lit sign will be more noticeable, as well as one that is positioned in a way which makes it immediately visible and that uses a color scheme which makes it easily discernible from the other signs that perform solely decorative functions.

The study could be continued and improved by analyzing a larger number of works, also those from other genres and in more languages.

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### **Krajobraz językowy w utworach filmowych i grach wideo**

**Abstrakt:** Badania krajobrazu językowego mogą być źródłem informacji o społeczności zamieszkującej dany obszar – używanych przez nią językach, ale także strukturze społecznej i hierarchii poszczególnych grup. Z tego względu krajobraz językowy może być również użyty w utworach artystycznych w celu przekazania odbiorcy wiedzy na temat świata przedstawionego. Celem niniejszego tekstu jest analiza funkcji pełnionych przez krajobraz językowy w utworach filmowych oraz grach wideo.

**Słowa kluczowe:** krajobraz językowy, utwory filmowe, gry wideo

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