Language Attitudes and Linguistic Landscapes of Malawi

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1. Introduction

Previous studies in perceptual dialectology, or the study of non-linguists' understandings of linguistic variation, have largely focused on identifying the social meanings that people assign to language depending on where and by whom it is used. Developed by Preston (1981), perceptual dialectology seeks to identify the specific linguistic features that play roles in triggering attitudes towards language, further aiming to discover the underlying beliefs or ideologies that motivate these attitudes (Preston, 2013, p. 160). In this paper, I identify attitudes regarding linguistic diversity in the multilingual African country of Malawi, additionally proposing that one factor shaping a speaker's attitudes toward language use is the representation of language in their environment, or their linguistic landscape. This new approach investigates language attitudes at both the individual and societal level, ultimately contributing to our understanding of how non-linguists notice and understand language variation.

The study of linguistic landscapes, or the entirety of ways that language appears in a public space, has recently emerged as a way for sociolinguists to investigate the interplay between language and its social value in a community (Landry & Bourhis, 1999; Shohamy et al., 2010). Analysis of language tokens on a variety of objects like billboards, advertisements, or road signs may reveal whether certain languages are privileged or disfavored by different social groups. In this paper, I argue that people's attitudes towards linguistic variation are reflected by their linguistic landscapes, and crucially, are shaped by them as well. I present research that identifies attitudes towards language use in Southern Malawi, a region with multiple minority languages at risk of disappearing (Moyo, 2003). In my novel application of simultaneous perceptual dialectology and linguistic landscape perspectives, I highlight how such triangulated methodologies can improve our understanding of linguistic variation in multidialectal or multilingual environments such as Malawi.

In section 2, I present a brief linguistic history of Malawi, identifying prior research on the linguistic characteristics of the country in which data was collected for this study. Next, in section 3 I discuss the theoretical background relevant to my paper, reviewing key studies in the linguistic subfields of perceptual dialectology and linguistic landscapes. I then describe my methodology in section 4, giving background on how I distributed a map task and collected linguistic landscape tokens in a triangulated approach to examining language attitudes in Malawi. After presenting the results of this study in section 5, in section 6 I discuss these results and what they indicate about how linguistic landscapes may affect perceptions of language variation. Finally, in section 7 I summarize my findings and suggest avenues of further research by restating the main contribution of this study: showing how linguistic landscapes shape and are shaped by people's attitudes towards the use of English and local languages in Southern Malawi.

2. A Brief Linguistic History of Malawi

Language, ethnicity, and political identity have long been intertwined in the postcolonial history of Malawi. A country of approximately 17 million residents, Malawi features over 16 spoken languages with a literacy rate of 66% (Ethnologue). The country is multilingual and multiethnic, with ten major ethnic groups that use Chichewa (a Bantu language spoken by members of the Chewa and Nyanja tribes) as a lingua franca (Kamwendo, 2016, p. 222). However, in reality the linguistic environment is more complicated, partially due to the country's shifting language policies and the historical and political influence of English and Chichewa (Moyo, 2003). These two languages play an outsize role in the country due to Malawi's legacy as a colony of the United Kingdom and the influence of its first post-independence president, Dr. Kumuzu Banda, a member of the Chewa tribe. Under this president's direction, the national government sought to promote the Chewa language and culture as part of a project of national unification throughout his rule (Moyo, 2002). Despite these efforts, the languages of Chilomwe, Chiyao, and Chitumbuka continue to be spoken by significant percentages of the population (Kishindo, 1998). While there have been recent efforts to revive these and other minority languages (Kamwendo, 2005, 2006; Matiki, 2009), official government language policies in the last two decades have wavered between requiring English-only or Chichewa-only instruction in primary schools (Kamwendo, 2016). However, recent research by McNamara (2015) suggests that ethnic groups in Malawi differ in their attitudes towards English, with Chewa speakers viewing it as a language of opportunity and Tumbuka speakers seeing its use as a transgression of traditional norms, perhaps due to a legacy of Tumbuka political and cultural marginalization by colonial and post-colonial governments.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1 Linguistic Landscapes

Synthesizing previous studies of language in public spaces, Landry and Bourhis (1997) first coined the term linguistic landscapes in a study examining how public and private signs illustrate the relative power and status of language varieties in a geographic area. Often, studies on linguistic landscapes have focused on countries with multiple language or dialect varieties in what is called a "diglossic situation" (Ferguson, 1996). In such environments, people incorporate lexical items from local dialects and supraregional "standard" varieties in their everyday speech, and these choices are often reflected in billboards, street signs, and other tokens of the linguistic landscape. Recent research has shown how globalization and multilingualism have affected the linguistic landscapes of urban spaces such as Tokyo (Backhaus, 2006) and the Chinatown area in Washington, DC (Lou, 2010) where English appears as a *lingua franca*. By analyzing how language tokens

are applied to objects in the urban space, these studies provide us with insights into how different language communities negotiate identity and power in shared public spaces.

Research on linguistic landscapes has also often sought to determine the relationship between a language's representation in public spaces and the value that different speakers assign to that language. In his review of current studies in linguistic landscapes, Gorter (2013) notes that many studies assume that the "language in which signs are written can influence the perception of the status of the different languages and affect linguistic behavior" (p. 202). In their original study, Landry and Bourhis (1997) explore the informational and symbolic functions of language and contrast in-group and out-group language use in public language tokens. They find evidence of a possible "carryover effect" between linguistic landscapes and language behavior, whereby the presence or absence of an in-group language in the linguistic landscape was correlated with how much speakers used that in-group language in a range of social and cultural settings (p. 45). This paper examines the possibility of a carryover effect between linguistic landscapes and people's evaluations of linguistic variation expressed via a map task, ultimately testing the relatively taken-for-granted assumption that there is a relationship between a person's perception of a language and that language's use in different semiotic representations.

3.2 Perceptual Dialectology and Language Attitudes

Inspired by the work of social psychologists using language surveys, Preston (1981) first developed the linguistic subfield of perceptual dialectology to explore how nonlinguists' view variation in language. A major methodology in this subfield is the use of map tasks to elicit descriptions from people that reveal their perceptions of linguistic differences across geographic spaces (Preston, 1981; Bucholtz et al., 2007). Often, these map tasks involve eliciting participants' judgments of the levels of "correctness" or "pleasantness" of a language varieties based on where they are spoken (Evans, 2013, p. 64). In these mental-mapping exercises, participants must indicate on a blank map where they believe speakers have different varieties of speech, and are often asked to provide lexical labels for these differences. While other approaches in this area of study have included using recorded examples of speech to elicit judgments (Boughton, 2006), the mental map approach has yielded useful insights into language variation in the U.S. and several European countries (Rabanus, 2011). These insights include showing how assumptions of linguistic homogeneity compare with actual language use (Evans, 2013), identifying stereotypes held by local residents unknown to outsiders (Bucholtz et al., 2007), and determining what kinds of linguistic divisions are perceived at regional or national levels (Theodoropoulou & Tyler, 2014).

Relatively few studies have examined people's perceptions of linguistic variation in African countries. However, many studies tend to focus on how speakers in these countries engage in "code-switching" between multiple languages or dialects, defined as using more than one language system within a conversation or sentence (Auer et al., 2014). The presence of multiple languages or "codes" in a country no doubt enhances the possibility for a variety of meanings to be associated with these languages and with their speakers. Theodoropoulou & Tyler (2014) describe a map task focusing on the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, identifying how Arabic speakers in Africa were evaluated by Qatari respondents as being distinctly different from those in other regions. While this paper reveals complex attitudes regarding the use of Arabic, it did not feature evaluations of linguistic variation in African countries by residents of these countries themselves. I address this gap in the literature by investigating what Bucholtz et al. (2007)

call the "situated" nature of language ideologies, or how they are "geographically bounded, socially contingent, and specific to particular places, times, and people" (p. 348). In this paper, I examine how language ideologies are situated in the linguistic landscape of Malawi, demonstrating how individuals' judgements of linguistic differences are reflected by the languages found in these landscapes.

4. Methodology

In order to examine attitudes towards the use of languages in Malawi, this study utilized a map task that was designed in accordance with the methods laid out by Preston (1989) and the methodology used by Bucholtz et al. (2007) in examining Californian language attitudes. The research instrument for this part of the study consisted of a onepage photocopied map of Malawi with five fill-in-the-blank items at the top. These items asked respondents to list demographic information, including their age, gender, occupation, and time spent living in the country (this last item was included as these maps were collected as part of a larger research project comparing expatriate and local residents' attitudes towards language in Malawi and Egypt). Two instructions were also printed at the top of each map in English: Circle areas on the map where people speak in different ways and Label those areas with a word or phrase describing how people talk in that area. Respondents were asked if they would like to participate in research on language use in Malawi, and if they agreed were provided with a map. No additional instructions were provided other than what appeared on the research instrument. To analyze the data from this map-labeling task, I adopted Bucholtz et al.'s (2007) methodology of dividing each map into areas of "equal and analytically manageable size" (p. 333). This was done by superimposing a 5x5 grid over each labeled map as shown in Figure 1:





Map responses were coded according to location and number of cells, number of words used, type of labels used, largest linguistic item (in terms of impressionistic size relative to other labels), and three example lexical items. Figures 2 and 3 provide examples of labeled maps, demonstrating how responses featured different label types. These labels were established by considering Bucholtz et al.'s (2007) methodology dividing types of labels

regarding language (such as "English" or "Chichewa"), people (ethnic descriptions such as "Chewa" or "Tumbuka people"), dialect (judgements of how well a language was spoken such as "Basic Chichewa"), and location (giving the name of a geographic region or city). Each figure's heading also contains information about the background of the respondent according to their self-reported answers to the demographic questions on the map and the type of labels coded in each response.

Figure 2: Labeled map of linguistic differences within Malawi, by a male student in Zomba, 28 years old (coded as having language, location, people, and dialect labels)



Figure 3: Labeled map of linguistic differences within Malawi, by a female marketer in Blantyre, 30 years old (coded as having language, location, and dialect labels)



The second data set in this study is composed of 148 tokens of language in public spaces. Tokens were collected mostly by car on the highways connecting the cities of Lilongwe, Blantyre, and Zomba and by walking around on the streets of these three cities. Following Lou's (2010) focus on commercial signs, I captured language tokens on shop signs, billboards, and buildings. Each token was coded according to the following criteria: language(s) used, location image was taken, source type (governmental or non-governmental), and function (i.e. commercial, educational, or religious). The final two criteria examine the relative status or influence of languages in the linguistic landscape by contrasting the language on governmental signs "issued by public authorities" and that on non-governmental signs "issued by individuals, associations, or firms acting more or less autonomously" (Shohamy et al., 2010, p. xi). Figures 4 and 5 give examples of governmental and non-governmental signs that feature English and local language tokens:

Figure 4: Government billboard near Blantyre featuring English and Chichewa



Figure 5: Non-government ATM posting in Zomba featuring English and Chichewa



5. Results

5.1 Responses to the Map Task

Fourteen maps were collected, with eight from Blantyre (the capital of Malawi's Southern Region), two from Mua, and one each from Lilongwe, Zomba, Liwonde, and Monkey Bay. Four women and ten men responded, with an average age of 38 years old. Seven of the fourteen respondents were employed in the field of education, with the remainder working in some aspect of the tourist industry (including an event planner and museum curator). Chichewa was the most frequently mentioned language (six maps), followed by English (three maps). Half of respondents did not overtly name any language variety, while one respondent listed nine distinct language and ethnic groups. The four most commonly-identified cells by respondents were in the north and central regions of the Malawi, with cells B1, B2, C2, and C3 each identified by at least 12 respondents. Figure 6 shows the frequency of different map label types used by respondents, along with examples of each type:

Туре	# of map mentions	Label Examples		
Language	8	"Chichewa" "English" "Chiyao"		
People	6	"Ngoni" "Chewa" "Tumbuka"		
Dialect	13	"Good Chichewa" "singsong" "broken" "smooth"		
Location	9	"Blantyre" "Lilongwe" "Zomba"		

Figure 6: Frequency and examples of map labels used by respondents

The dialect labels provided perhaps the most revealing look at individual attitudes toward the languages of Chichewa and English. As seen in the examples of Figures 2 and 3, labels like "English speaking = education" and "they are mocked to speak in capital letters while speaking Chichewa" suggest that respondents positively valued the ability to speak English and Chichewa well, and that different regions (especially the North) were associated with "good" or "bad" speakers of these two languages.

5.2 Linguistic Landscape Tokens

148 images containing language tokens were collected for this study, with many images captured in urban areas like Lilongwe (13 tokens), Zomba (15 tokens), and Blantyre (35 tokens). The majority of tokens (102) were in English only, followed by

tokens with English and a local language (defined as Chichewa, Chiyao, or any other non-English language listed in Ethnologue's 2017 listing of spoken languages in Malawi), with tokens in a local language having the least amount of tokens. Five tokens were found with a mixture of English and a non-local language like Japanese. Figure 7 breaks down the type of tokens by language and status as governmental or non-governmental signs:

Token Type	English Only	Local Language Only	English and Local	Other	Total
Non-Governmental	87	6	31	5	129
Governmental	15	0	4	0	19
Total	102	6	35	5	148

Figure 7: Frequency of linguistic landscape tokens in Southern Malawi by language and source type

A Chi-Square test of significance performed between language and token type did not reveal a statistically-significant association between these factors (p value = 0.572).

6. Discussion

The results of this study suggest that there is potentially a "carryover effect" (Landry and Bourhis 1997) between the linguistic landscape and residents' perceptions of linguistic variation as expressed in a map labeling task requiring the identification of language differences. The four most commonly identified cells (in the north and central parts of the country) on respondents' maps correspond with areas of Malawi found to be the most linguistically diverse in a recent language survey of the country (Kishindo 2010). While dialect labels were the most frequent type of labels used by respondents, the largest lexical item on five of the maps referenced Chichewa, perhaps corresponding to its salience in the perceptions of those respondents. These results suggest that residents of Southern Malawi are highly aware of variation both between and within languages despite the official status of Chichewa and English, and often used ability in these two languages as a way to positively or negatively evaluate speakers in different geographic regions.

The heavy presence of English in the linguistic landscape as well as the prevalence of non-governmental tokens suggests three potential language ideologies and pressures in Southern Malawi. First, English appears to be the prestige variety of the country favored by the state (as 15 of 19 governmental tokens were English only). Additionally, the relatively high number of English-local language mixed tokens (35) suggests that code-mixing is unmarked. A final language ideology represented in the linguistic landscape was proposed during an interview with Dr. Paul Kishindo, Director for the University of Malawi's Centre for Language Studies. According to Dr. Kishindo, much of the signage in Malawi reflects a need for foreign aid projects to have physical proof of their funded projects for donors, thus reflecting a focus on reaching a global rather than local audience. However, a closer analysis of the four governmental tokens with both English and a local language complicates this interpretation, two of which are shown in Figures 8 and 9:

Figure 8: Government billboard on the road from Blantyre to Mt. Mulanje featuring Chichewa and English



Figure 9: Government poster in Zomba featuring Chiyao and English



Figure 8's main text about child marriage is in Chichewa, while Figure 9's main message that albino rights are human rights is in Chiyao. The English content of both signs ("Gender equality and women empowerment now!" in Figure 8 and "Produced by Eastern Region Police Headquarters" in Figure 9) is not particularly dominant, being much smaller and positioned at the bottom of each token. A similar balance is found in the other two government English-local language tokens. However, despite this top-down flow of using local languages to reach local audiences in mixed signs, English-only signage was much more typical overall (especially in the case of street signs and government-sponsored development projects), suggesting the government's support of this language.

7. Conclusions

Despite the dominance of English in the linguistic landscape, only three of the fourteen respondents mentioned English in their map labeling of language differences in Malawi. Does this indicate that the linguistic landscape does not have a "carryover effect" for residents of Malawi? I argue that there is indeed a carryover effect, though with several caveats. Due to the low literacy rate in Malawi of 66%, the relative status of languages in the linguistic landscape may not affect all residents equally. While all map respondents were literate by necessity, my methodology did not anticipate how to elicit perceptions of variation from illiterate individuals. Sociolinguistic interviews with such individuals could have yielded a more diverse set of views and could support the carryover effect if their perceptions differed from literate individuals perceiving the linguistic landscape.

Additionally, as the majority of linguistic landscape tokens were collected on the sides of major roads, it is possible that these signs were designed to be maximally clear to all commuters, resulting in the use of the national language of English over local varieties as a *lingua franca*. Finally, more map responses and linguistic landscape tokens from other areas of the country would have provided a better understanding of language attitudes in the entirety of Malawi.

In this study, I have contributed to our understanding of language attitudes in Southern Malawi and have proposed that linguistic landscapes may be related to folk perceptions of linguistic variation. Future research is needed on other potential "carryover effects" and should examine how linguistic landscapes and non-linguists' understandings of language interact in other countries and linguistic environments. I challenge future researchers to consider applying multiple methodologies in studying linguistic variation; such triangulated studies have much to teach us about how people and societies interact with language in diverse and occasionally contentious ways.

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