

Layers of the linguistic landscape in the West Bank: observations and questions on the roles of language in Palestine (report)

ISSN 2657-9774; <https://doi.org/10.36534/erlj.2022.01.04>

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Although my primary role is as a professor at Portland State University, in Portland, Oregon, USA, I am spending this academic year (2022-23) in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as a Fulbright Scholar, based at Bethlehem University. Through my observations so far, as well as through my collaborations with colleagues and neighbors, it is easy to see the ways *language* sits at the center of schooling, particularly in considering the ways it may act as a mirror, to reflect and enhance identity, or an eraser, editing or even censoring parts of who one is or aspires to be. I am repeatedly finding myself reflecting on the ways language plays into the constructs of *culturally sustaining pedagogies* (Paris & Alim 2017), and what this means for children in Palestine today.

Even though I am only about a month into this year-long experience as a person from the US in Palestine, I am already marveling at the semiotic landscape (Kress & van Leeuwen 2020) around me, all, of course, filtered through my primary language, which is US English. And I am noting not just the ways in which the linguistic landscape shapes my realities, but also the ways in which it shows up in school settings, raising the question as to how language and power show up in educational contexts.

Upon arrival in Israel, which was my main transit point when traveling from the US, I immediately noticed the tri-lingual road signage, which I interpreted as a way to ensure directional information was accessible to a range of travelers. Given that the primary language of Israel is Hebrew, it was unsurprising to me that the first language on each sign was Hebrew, followed by Arabic, and finally by English. As an educator, I cannot help but wonder what it is like for children in this context – particularly in this Hebrew-speaking space – to grow up with this linguistic landscape – and wonder at how this shows up in their educational contexts.

After just a few days in Israel to sort out some of my paperwork with the US Embassy, I crossed into the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and specifically the West Bank. Immediately, I noticed that on the road signs – including on the road signs between the Palestinian “islands” in the West Bank (known as “Area A,” under the Oslo Agreement, under Palestinian administrative and police control) (Kelly 2016), the convention remained the same as in Israel, with Hebrew at the top, Arabic in the middle, and English at the bottom. This was different from what I anticipated, in that I predicted Arabic would now be first, followed by Hebrew and then English. But upon reflection, I realized these highway-like roads – which thread like corridors through variously controlled jurisdictions of the West Bank (Areas A, B, and C) – actually have a number of Israeli drivers on them, as they move to, from, and through Israeli Settlements (as explained in greater detail in the 2022 Office of the European Union Representative’s report, included in the references). Again, I am made to wonder what this might mean for the children in this context– this time, the Arabic-speaking children– to grow up with this landscape, and to see how this visual hierarchy of language shows up in educational contexts.

Reflecting on this role of language, and considering the role of the semiotic landscape as a whole, reminded me of a recent conversation with a well-educated Palestinian colleague I will call Layla. A lifelong resident of Ramallah currently working in East Jerusalem, Layla expressed her outrage and sorrow at the ways she saw Palestinian *erasure* taking place in school settings, and particularly those schools for Palestinian children being educated in Israel. First, she noted the frequent use of the term “Arab” rather than *Palestinian* in school textbooks and instruction, which she saw as a form of denial.

Secondly, she noted that in textbooks approved for use with Palestinian children in East Jerusalem, the term *Palestine* is not even used to describe the geographic region of the West Bank in which Palestinians live. Rather, according to Layla, the textbooks (approved by the Israeli Ministry of Education) use the terms “Judea and Samaria,” which reflect the historic naming of the *region*, but without naming Palestine nor Palestinian identity.

This form of re-naming (or perhaps erasure) has not gone without notice. Tel Aviv-based scholar Ben-Amos (2020, as quoted in Kashti), wrote about this issue of Israeli-approved textbooks and exams, which present a carefully curated version of the history of the region as well as a purposeful (re) naming of places. Ben-Amos noted that in the majority of textbooks, required for use by Israeli as well as some Palestinian children, Israel’s continued control of the West Bank is described in “a language that blurs the violence involved.”

Ben-Amos explains that much of the history (and contemporary expressions) of conflict in the region— well detailed by international organizations such as the United Nations— is glossed over in school curricula. “It is not simplistic denial, claiming that this reality does not exist. It is more complex denial, based on the fact that education officials know the reality in the [Palestinian] territories but are unwilling or unable to admit it,” (Ben-Amos 2020, as quoted in Kashti). Ben-Amos goes on to explain, “Denial appears in a subtle way that is difficult to pinpoint. It does not stem from the claim that the occupation does not exist, but from the way it is absent from the discourse, where it should have appeared. Alternatively, from the way it is represented in the discourse” (as quoted in Kashti 2020).

Although I freely admit my limited understanding of the nuance and scope of this entire context, I must wonder if this is a kind of intentional “ontology of forgetting,” which, “involves forgetting the history of white supremacy, racism, and Western imperial projects that proved central to the states’ formation and ascendancy” (Pon 2009: 66). Or perhaps this is a kind of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1986), wherein terming Palestine as “Judea and Samaria” serves as a kind of eraser, quietly dusting away recent history, community, and identity. What does it mean for a Palestinian child today to see the name of their identity and homeland *not included* in the mandated curriculum and assessments? How does this use of language serve to affirm the identities of some children, while subsuming that of others? I pose these questions with genuine curiosity.

Within this broader context, in becoming situated in my new community for the coming year, I have spent much of the past month exploring my immediate neighborhood in Bethlehem, navigating my own hyper-local linguistic contexts. I have been learning the path to the university, exploring where to buy groceries, finding the most convenient ATM, and the like. In addition, because this is a town of tremendous historic importance, I have also been exploring the main tourism sites, which include the Church of the Nativity, said to be the birthplace of Jesus of Nazareth, located (perhaps unsurprisingly) in what is known as the “old city” section of Bethlehem. As is common with many travelers, I have been using a few essential mapping applications on my smartphone to help me find my way, and although this has been mostly beneficial and accurate, I encountered one key mystery related to place-names.

I primarily use two apps (Google Maps and Maps.me) to navigate, relying most heavily on Google Maps. During my first few days here in Bethlehem, while using Google Maps to navigate my way back to my apartment from the old city, I noted the most direct path was on a street Google Maps had labeled (in the Roman alphabet rather than in Arabic), “maggid Mezritch” (see Figure 1). I wandered, phone in hand like a divining rod, scanning the semiotic landscape for some sign or label that resembled this. Although not all streets are well-marked, this particular route seemed to be a rather major thoroughfare, which *did* have street signs— but that read, “شارع البابا بولس السادس,” which translates to “Pope Paul VI St.” (with the sign appearing in both Arabic and English, (Figure 2), with the English likely catering to the flow of tourists). This echoed what my guidebooks showed on their printed maps, as well as what Bing maps included. Why, then, would Google Maps have this street labeled differently?

In asking my neighbors about this street being labeled “maggid Mezritch” on Google Maps, no one I have asked has heard of this, and no one I have asked knows to what or whom that might refer. In an effort to learn more, I found a Wikipedia page (2022) focused on “Dov Ber of Mezeritch,” also known as the *Maggid of Mezeritch*, with the term “maggid” meaning, “an itinerant Jewish teacher” (Merriam Webster, 2022). In sharing this insight with my colleagues and neighbors, all are mystified.

At the time of this writing, I remain unclear about this label for this street name on Google Maps, and given the context of the larger issue of re-naming and “erasure” (as my colleague Layla said) of historically Arabic-language place names, I am left to wonder about it. Given that Pope Paul VI passed away in 1978, might the label “maggid Mezritch” perhaps be a not-yet-updated name for this street from a previous era? Or is it a new label? Whatever the case, this recasting of place-names has been occurring for centuries across Palestine, and continues in earnest today. The most commonly offered examples, of late, focus on the instances when Palestinian communities have been razed and/ or replaced with Israeli settlements, with, for example, Jabil Sikh being renamed as “Mount Jonah,” or parts of the Palestinian village Ni’lin taken and renamed as “Hashmonaim” (Dahamshe 2020). What is the experience of children taking geography tests, required to use these fresh labels?

This practice of renaming is occurring across the West Bank, with relatively few road signs identifying the existence of Palestinian towns and villages. Ujvari (2022) recently published a study of this very issue of road signs, describing, an “excessive placement of [road] signs referring to Israeli settlements compared to signs referring to Palestinian communities, transliteration of Arabic names of sites into Hebrew, and deletion of Arabic, a language associated with the Palestinian identity, from road signs” (p. 374). In short, signs of this nature offer both an informational function as well as a symbolic function, serving to establish (or maintain or defend) hierarchy in ways that leverage language (Landry & Bourhis 1997). One must wonder how all this lands upon Palestinians, and especially children in schools.

How, then, do these ideas circle back to the centrality of the role of language in education? For students, as well as for their families and teachers, what does this signify, and what form of emotional taxation does this cause? To consider these questions, I turn again to the insights from *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, and especially the contributions of Paris and Alim. In an interview by Ferlazzo in *Education Week* (2017), Paris and Alim explained, “Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster— to sustain— linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation and revitalization... [It] exists wherever education sustains the lifeways of communities who have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling.” Given the current circumstances and conditions in Palestine, particularly as related to place naming, I am left to wonder how Palestinian children make sense of the language used to name them, and their homeland, in schools today.

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Figure 1: Screenshot from Google Maps, retrieved 28 September, 2022



Figure 2: Photograph of street sign in Bethlehem, Occupied Palestinian Territories, taken by author 28 September, 2022

