Lingscape – A smartphone application for research on linguistic landscapes

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With this poster I will introduce a crowdsourcing approach to research on linguistic landscapes using a smartphone application. It will give a demonstration of the app and discuss aspects of data collection and storage as well as possible ways of data exploitation.

Documenting language practice in public space has become a vital sub branch of Sociolinguistics under the label "linguistic landscapes", mainly following the description given by Landry & Bourhis (1997: 25): "The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration." Especially multilingual communities like Luxembourg offer a rich potential for the analysis of many different aspects of language use in public space due to the copresence of several official and contact languages on public signs, resulting in a complex multilingual labeling practice and a rich linguistic landscape. Therefore, the use of a smartphone application opens up new ways for both research on linguistic landscapes and data collection via crowdsourcing. In addition, the project offers the opportunity to bring together researchers and citizens in a joint research process. Users will not only be part of the data collection process, but also can learn more about the multilingual complexity of the society they're living in.

Building on the evidence from a prior study (cf. Gilles et al. 2010) the app will enable users to anonymously upload and comment pictures of public signs in Luxembourg and beyond. The collected pictures are stored on a dedicated server together with metadata (like location, used languages, date of upload, description, categorization) and are available to the public through a map viewer within the app. The uploaded content will be moderated and annotated by the Lingscape team to guarantee that the material is appropriate and doesn't violate intellectual property rights. In addition to that the images will be processed via OCR to prepare automated analyses of the letterings.

This research design allows for the collection of huge amounts of data throughout the entire country of Luxembourg. Still the gathered data will of course not cover the entire linguistic landscape. Therefore, we will address national media to create public awareness for the app and also employ it in academic teaching to collect more specific data. While data collection during the initial project phase will focus on Luxembourg and the surrounding area, the app shall be opened up for other research projects on linguistic landscapes all over the world in the second phase. This will also include a web-based map viewer and a comprehensive research database.

References

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