

reviews

Language, Space, and Cultural Play: Theorizing affect in the semiotic landscape

Lionel Wee and Robbie B. H. Goh (2019)

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Summary

Have you noticed how in certain public spaces people act in particular ways? Or noticed how some signs in public places ask, prevent or code certain behaviors, such as being loud or wearing particular clothes? This is in part the subject of Lionel Wee's and Robbie B. H. Goh's recent book *Language, Space, and Cultural Play* which attempts to capture the role that affect plays in the semiotic landscape. Despite the surge in studies of linguistic landscape in recent years many of the studies follow similar lines of method and analysis focusing upon multilingual situations. Lee and Goh take a different approach here using the term semiotic landscape (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010) to draw our attention to how landscapes can create regimes of affect. The introductory chapter focuses on some linguistic handlings of affect, for example Besnier, (1990) and McElhinny's (2010) reviews of affect. Heeding Besnier's earlier discussion of how affect is a multichannel problem that entails non-verbal elements and McElhinny's discussion of gaps within research on affect, Lee and Goh develop

a semiotic approach to affect rooted in the pragmatic semiotics of Charles Sander Peirce. The authors then provide a discussion of their understanding of affect emphasizing its difference to emotion. With regards to semiotic and linguistic landscape studies Lee and Goh emphasize that it is affect which has more semiotic potential. As emotions are noted to reside within the individual affect resides in the environment, for example the phrase “be affected by” can often be associated with the environment and that affect is often associated with an orientation with regards to an object. The authors then discuss some studies which have used affect in semiotic landscape research noting that affect is useful in referring to third places (Oldenburg, 2005, 2009) for example libraries which and other social places which code for certain types of behavior.

In chapter 2 the authors then discuss the semiotics of CS Peirce in a little more detail in developing their method for analyzing affect. One point about Peircean semiotics that the authors emphasize, and many others neglect, is with regards to the notion of inclusion where a sign such as a symbol would include both an index and an icon, Peirce’s second tripartite of signs. Peircean semiotics is often quite messy in how it is implemented, here Lee and Goh utilize the Peircean system in order to think about how affect can be oriented towards objects within the semiotic landscape (page 19). Affective regimes are the ways in which affect is materialized in the semiotic landscape. Lee and Goh raise two questions with regards to the materialization of affect: “how does language work in conjunction with nonlinguistic resources to vis-a-vis the circulation of affect? Two, how can the circulation of signs (linguistic and other-wise) lead to changes in the ways in which they are understood?” To answer these questions the authors first introduce Goffman’s (1981) notion of the production format of animator (the person speaking), author (the individual

who put together a piece of text) and the principal (the person who goes on record as having their ideas expressed through the text). These different roles in the production format, Lee and Goh argue, allow for a more nuanced understanding of how affect is regulated. An example they offer here has to do with text messaging, where using extra letters can convey different sense of affect. For example, *LOL*, or *hiiiiii* where the use of extra letters indexes affect (being playful). To answer the second question the authors introduce Silverstein's (2003) orders of indexicality and Eckert's, (2008) notion of indexical field. Both notions of indexicality relate to how it is that certain variables and ways of speaking index an array of ideological assumptions that speakers and hearers have. It is through these stereotypes that affect then circulates and it is not just language that can accomplish this but images as well.

Chapter 3 is a focused discussion of the Japanese adjective *kawaii* and how it emerges as a regime of affect in the semiotic landscape. *Kawaii* refers to things that are “cute” or “adorable.” *Kawaii* is often employed in advertisements and public service announcements as well as the mascots of Japanese cities. The discussion in the chapter is based on a few questions (pages 44-45) regarding how the indexical field shifts with regards to *kawaii*, what stances are taken with regards to it, and how does the emplacement with *kawaii* interact with other features of the semiotic landscape? In the first two cases the authors suggest that *kawaii* mascots garner a sense of affection and likeability with regards to politics in some cases as well as commodification. In terms of the latter question, the authors note how *kawaii* is often represented through the use of hiragana a script which is curvier and is the script that Japanese children are initialized socialized in with regards to literacy practices. *Kawaii* is present in the Japanese in semiotic landscape in a range of contexts from transportation, public service

announcements, tourism and taxation, to a name a few. Goffman's production format is used as a means of discussing *kawaii* where such mascots are the animators, and to that end the principal and authors of such messages are largely not perceived. To a degree *kawaii* are used to soften the message from government offices making them seem more approachable.

Reverencing the Landscape is taken up in Chapter 4 where reverence refers to how landscapes become affiliated with significance which can be spiritual to a degree, but also significant in terms of historical events such as the sites for political protests and demonstrations. The semiotics of such regimes of reverence the authors note, set the site a part from other places through such things as: narratives, linguistic behaviors, and other semiotics that often require certain behaviors of people. A good example would include the signage that one sees in Buddhist temples in Thailand which makes requests of adherents and other visitors to, for example, to dress appropriately (Jocuns et al., 2015). Lee and Goh also note that there are ramifications of not abiding by these rules such that another looming presence within the affective regime of reverence is fear. Such sites where the reverence is in play within the semiotic landscape include: holy ground or the place of the Gods (e.g. Mount Kinabalu in Sabah, Malaysia); genocide memorials (e.g. Dachau); temples and sports arenas (e.g. Fenway Park in Boston, MA); as well as burials sites (e.g. Graceland, the burial site of Elvis Presley) and memorials (e.g. the October 6 1976 memorial at Thammasat University in Bangkok). To ground the analysis in Peircean semiotics, Lee and Goh suggest that reverence in semiotic landscape is not so much caused by spiritual force, but the interpretant (sign/object/interpretant in Peirce's semiotic typology). In other words, in order for semiotic landscapes to

entail an affective regime of reverence a human interpretant must interpret the semiotic object with affective reverence.

Chapter 5 draw our attention to *Romancing the Landscape* where the “*bildung*” narrative is discussed where a young protagonist sets off on a romantic journey or quest. Western fiction is filled with such *bildung* narratives which include Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the *Hobbit* as well as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*. Lee and Goh discuss features of the *bildung* landscape which are often wild and unchartered making them difficult to traverse. This leads to a detailed discussion and analysis of tourism, specifically filmic or cinematic tourism where the film sites of movies have become romanticized tourist landscapes. Such landscapes include New Zealand which was the film site for *Lord of the Rings* movies and tours has developed around these movies and in so doing creating affective regimes that are romanticized around these *bildung* narratives such that sojourners can experience the journey themselves. *Lord of the Rings* is juxtaposed with the *Game of Thrones* series which contained numerous *bildung* narratives where filming took place in such locations as Northern Ireland, Iceland and numerous others. Stockholm is also discussed as the site of the Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* series novels. The authors conclude the chapter noting how the affective regime of romance and *bildung* narratives becomes commodified through an affective regime in the experience economy – through tourism industries that support them. In short, these *bildung* narratives entail powerful affective economies.

“*Friendly Places*” is the title of Chapter 6 and refers to how some places in the world develop affective regimes that create a sense of friendliness within a place. Built around the notion of “*third place*” (Oldenburg 1997) which is a

social place where people gather socially that is distinct from the home (a first place) and work (second place), the affective regime of third places denotes places and their representation in the semiotic landscapes as friendly or convivial places. A good example is the public library where one would observe signage that asks patrons to be “quiet” and “no eating,” etc. In such convivial spaces diversity is managed to the degree that multiculturalism does not work so nicely with conviviality (Nowicka & Vertovec, 2013). The authors also introduce Gilroy's (2004, 2006) concept of multiculturalism which notes how linguistic, cultural, religious, racial and other distinctions are taken as a given and that the notion of conviviality should accept that such diverse groups live in close proximity. Multiculturalism then refers to a group or society that contains multiple disparate cultural, religious and other groups. The discussion develops into several counter arguments about conviviality in the later modern world. For the present discussion conviviality then refers to how places are constructed affectively and one such way that is accomplished is through the use of language. Finally, the discussion of conviviality as an affective regime is shown to be nuanced within the Singapore neighborhood of Yishun which attempted to develop a dementia friendly neighborhood made up of a variety of regimes related to different organizations in the community working from the community and individual levels constituting, “a larger affective regime” (p. 123). In the conclusion to the chapter Lee and Goh discuss how such an analysis can be related to analyzing social movements in terms of how the different regimes that make up a convivial affective regime in a “dementia friendly” neighborhood are stitched together.

Chapter 7 is titled *The Affective Regime of Luxury and Exclusivity* has been handled previously in the semiotic landscape through the work of

Thurlow and Jaworski (2009, 2010) where wealth and elitism emerge not through material wealth but through the semiotic resources that index wealth. Lee and Goh note that the regimes of wealth are built around three things: security, stimulation and identity. Security is the means through which the masses are separated from the exclusive, stimulation where particular activities such as yachting and golf bind those within the community in contrast to those outside of it and identity where such things as luxury properties are said to be imbued with attributes of those who own them. In one section of the chapter they describe how this regime is materialized through in part through the luxury homes of the exclusively wealthy, not to mention the branding narratives of exclusive estates. The latter brings to mind the ads for exclusive condos and townhome developments in and around Bangkok their construction sites materialized with sloganizations with often the largest and most recognizable feature being the price per square meter. In their analysis of exclusivity, they also discuss the well documented exclusivity of luxury apartments in Manhattan New York City where often celebrities such as Barbara Streisand are excluded despite their fame and wealth. The discussion also includes massclusivity where in some cases luxury brands have lower priced equivalent brands marketed to the non-exclusive masses. One such example being luxury hotel brands that have lower priced brands, e.g. Courtyard by Marriot. In sum this chapter emphasizes how luxury and exclusivity are also materialized in affective regimes that are linguistically and semiotically realized through branding practices and branding narratives.

Affecting the Digital Landscape is the subject of Chapter 8, the last analytical chapter in the volume. The focus of Lee and Goh's discussion here is on the R-word campaign, an on-line campaign to rid the world of the usage of

the word “retard” in reference to persons with autism and other mental deficiencies. The use of the term digital landscape is interesting as they use it not to refer to digital literacy (Gee, 2007; Jones & Hafner, 2012) or languages use and representation on line (i.e. netscape, Troyer, 2012), but to refer to how on-line world and off-line worlds are often connected through augmented reality (AR, e.g. QR codes in public places). Their analysis focuses upon how the R-word campaign used the discourse of hate speech to eliminate any usage of it, regardless of the speakers perlocutionary intent. To that end the indexical field of the word “retard” has been narrowed to include all other meanings and potential meanings. The R-word campaign created a regime of affect in the digital landscape through the use of videos and other postings on-line and effectively enregistering (Agha, 2005) it. Lee and Goh then discuss the vulnerability that internet users are to cyber-bullying and how augmented reality is used anti-bullying and cyber-bullying campaigns.

Chapter 9 is the conclusion and the Lee and Goh discuss three areas that they have identified for future research in affective regimes: the digitalization of third places, the experience economy, and the dynamics of affective regimes. In the first instance the authors note how the third places (café’s, libraries) are often sites which are connected to digital landscapes through the use of augmented reality. Places like Starbucks are now filled with QR codes as well as other stores and packaging. Many of the products we now consume are connected to digital landscapes through QR codes. What happens linguistically and semiotically when interact with a QR is certainly an area of future research that seems quite worthy and beneficial. Their discussion of the experience economy focus not only tourism mentioned in Chapter 5 but also how certain brands and products (e.g. apple) sell not only products but the experience of

having and using said products. Lastly the dynamics of affective regimes entails how such things as mourning the death of a public figure or the commemoration of an historical event (Tiananmen Square) are related to affective regimes through how they can be commemorated on-line in different ways than intended. For example, the People's Republic of China has attempted to erase the Tiananmen Square massacre from public record, however it exists in on-line form and outside the borders of China.

Evaluation

Lee and Goh present a fruitful and compelling analysis. If there are any criticisms, I would suggest one is in how the authors use the analytical methodology of Peircean semiotics in the analytical chapters. The analysis is not weak but rather the authors do not employ the same resources for analysis in each chapter. This leaves the reader questioning whether or not such analysis can be replicated in other places. To that end I will note that I have found the notion of affective regimes helpful in a present analysis that I am conducting of a project that examines how students perceive the semiotic landscape of their schoolscape. I have been able utilize the concept of reverence in the affective regime in a paper from this project and the notion has been helpful in developing my thinking on this data set. The audience for this book would be researchers and graduate students who are interested in linguistic and semiotic landscape studies; it could be used as an example of how to analyze data in the semiotic landscape and how landscapes are constructed with affect in mind.

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