

4 English in Asmara as a Changing Reflection of Online Globalization

*Sjaak Kroon, Jenny-Louise Van der Aa
and Yonas Mesfun Asfaha*

An Internet Café in Asmara as a Vignette of Globalization

In a typical Internet Café and WiFi access point in Asmara, the capital city and center of Eritrea, a small country in the Horn of Africa, young people on a daily basis log into Facebook, Yahoo, Google, etc. and exchange text and voice messages. The old PCs that were used to access online material when Internet Cafés first appeared in the late 1990s are now mostly replaced by smart phones, i-Pads and laptops brought along by customers. People sit in comfortable sofas across large rooms and flow out onto the streets, 50–100 meters in the café's surrounding, standing, sitting on a bike or inside a car, making use of WiFi and Internet access. There are two, three assistants collecting the 10–20 Nakfa (0.75–1.00 USD) per hour fee, providing some technical assistance and taking care of older customers who use voice messaging to connect with their children or spouses abroad. These centers are famous for their long hours of service, some working for about eighteen hours per day. Internet service is provided most prominently by the state-owned Eritrea Telecommunication Services Corporation (Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1 Internet Café price list, Asmara 2016.

Stepping outside the Internet Café onto the streets of Asmara, one can see that the linguistic landscape of the city also reflects this particular phenomenon of globalization showing many written signs and symbols advertising the availability of Internet and WiFi access points. Buildings, at the same time, still carry the old trilingual (Tigrinya, Arabic and English) official nameplates of the institutions hosted there; and around small businesses, on information boards and on walls we see examples of multilingual grassroots literacy, displaying printed and handwritten texts and graffiti. The signs of globalization in the linguistic landscape, mainly using English, are however increasingly prominent and blend with traditional literacies forming a diverse ensemble of semiotic signs reflecting at the same time marginality and globalization in Asmara.

In globalized times, the side effects of complex international politics have created an interesting phenomenon, now known as superdiversity. Coined more than ten years ago by Vertovec (2006), the term initially drew together insights from the sociology of migration, in which the so-called diversification of diversity became central, and from studies on digital culture, increasingly highlighting issues, problems and affordances of (worldwide) online access. It is this last factor that is of specific importance to us here, as the digital aspect of globalization and its affordances is the central focus of this chapter. It is also a well-known fact that globalization, especially in marginal areas, in many cases goes together with unequal participation (Wang, et al., 2014) in offline as well as online contexts (Castells, 2010). Apart from an observed slower, less advanced and less democratic development of technological infrastructures needed for online participation there is also the phenomenon of governments that as part of what can be considered a form of isolation politics put restrictions on global Internet access of their citizens, as happens e.g. in North Korea, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and China, to name just a few, albeit in very different ways in each country.¹ There Internet access is cut off relatively often and people's online activities are strictly monitored and controlled by the state. Many have likened Eritrea with at least the first country, North Korea. Its recent history of international isolation combined with, what is reported by many, as a large outmigration of citizens from within its borders (Van Reisen, Estefanos, & Rijken, 2012) would suggest a backlash in connectivity, a slower or no technological and economic growth and a tightening control of government on online activities. However, nothing seems to be less true. In this chapter, we will aim to show that in spite of its alleged international isolation and stagnating technological development, the people in Eritrea are digitally quite well connected and the country shows a slow but sure development of digital affordances and infrastructures and witnesses a move from analogue text to a complex on/offline semiotics. We will investigate this development by mainly taking a look at English, one of the main drivers of globalization (Pennycook, 1994, 2010), as reflected

in the linguistic landscape of Eritrea's capital Asmara, more specifically its main shopping street Harnet Avenue. In doing so, our central question will be what the patterned use of English tells us about the above-mentioned issues. By means of longitudinal linguistic landscaping, we will sketch the development of English in Asmara over the last 12 years.

Accidental Linguistic Landscape Experiences in Eritrea

When visiting Eritrea for the first time in 2001 at the occasion of an international conference commemorating the tenth anniversary of the independence of Eritrea,² linguistic landscaping was not yet established as a separate line of research in sociolinguistics. Although Landry and Bourhis' seminal paper on linguistic landscapes dates back to 1997 (Landry & Bourhis, 1997), it was only in 2003 that Scollon and Wong-Scollon called for 'progressively more acute analyses of the ways in which places in time and space come to have subjective meanings for the humans who live and act within them' (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 2003, p. 12). The collections of linguistic landscape studies by Gorter (2006), Shohamy and Gorter (2008) and Shohamy, Ben-Rafael and Barni (2010) can be considered an answer to the Scollons's plea.

In hindsight, the pictures taken in Asmara during the 2001 conference did, in addition to touristic urban and rural landscapes, also show some semiotic signs, such as the five meters high monument of the sandals worn by Eritrean freedom fighters in the war against Ethiopia, placed in Shida Square as a symbol of Eritrea's freedom, and a socialist realism painting in the conference center showing a group of heavily armed Eritrean freedom fighters having a joint meal in the field – images celebrating victory and independence (see Figure 4.2). Consciously taken linguistic landscape pictures were still missing then.

This changed during a 2005 research visit³ when some non-systematic linguistic landscape pictures were made in Asmara. These included an Italian sign *Attenti al cane* (beware of the dog) at private premises, a bilingual Tigrinya Italian sign *Macelleria* (butcher's shop), an official bilingual Tigrinya and English sign *Public Library*, a trilingual Tigrinya, Arabic and English street name sign *Harnet Ave*, an apparently old Italian sign *Divieto d'affissione*, forbidding people to stick bills on the wall, and a trilingual advertisement for the *Asmara School of Languages* (see Figure 4.3).

Also without these pictures being taken specifically to do linguistic landscaping, they provide us with what has been called by Blommaert (2013, p. 2) a 'first-line sociolinguistic diagnostic' of this particular area reflecting the presence of Italian as the old colonial language and the combined use of Tigrinya, Arabic and English as the postindependence working languages of the government. The other officially recognized languages in Eritrea, i.e. Tigre (just like Tigrinya written in Ge'ez script),



Figure 4.2 Painting, Asmara 2001.



Figure 4.3 Collage of signs, Asmara 2005.

Afar, Saho, Bilen, Bidhaawyeet, Kunama and Nara (all written in Latin alphabet) were not represented in the pictures. Still, as a consequence of Eritrea's language and education policy that recognizes the equality of all Eritrean languages, all nine Eritrean languages were at the time (and still are) used as languages of instruction and taught as school subjects in primary education and they were also employed to produce daily radio programs by the state broadcast media (Asfaha, 2009a). Language equality in education, in other words, apparently doesn't imply the languages' written use in public space. As Asfaha (2009a, p. 24), reporting

on a number of field trips all over the country, put it: 'Although the larger rural parts of Eritrea are not visibly rich in written language, the major urban centres share a better public print atmosphere with street signs, names of businesses and public offices written in three languages (Tigrinya, Arabic and English) and three scripts (Ge'ez, Arabic and Latin alphabet). A similar mix of languages and scripts is usually applied to produce handwritten signs, announcements and graffiti on notice boards and walls'. By way of summary, we can say that the accidentally found linguistic landscapes above reflect the image of the new independent state and its colonial heritage.

Before going into a more systematic analysis of Asmara's linguistic landscape over time, let us first discuss some of the ins and outs of linguistic landscaping as a branch of sociolinguistics.

Linguistic Landscaping

In much of the earlier research on linguistic landscaping, the focus has been heavily on counting the numbers of languages and language combinations or other semiotic signs that could be found in a specific public space either referring to sociolinguistic usages or to other sociocultural indices (Juffermans, 2015). From approaches to multilingualism, counting the number of street sign languages, home languages and so on, to superdiversity, describing multilingual interaction and a more integrated semiotic picture, linguistic landscaping has evolved into a possibility to thoroughly produce 'thick descriptions', echoing an anthropological methodology as coined in Blommaert (2013) and further developed in Blommaert and Maly (2016). We would like to propose here, in accordance with the move to a more ethnographic linguistic landscape approach, the following three propositions. In line with Blommaert (2013), we see linguistic landscaping first of all as a first-line sociolinguistic diagnostic of a particular area, in our case, Harnet Avenue in downtown Asmara. It can provide us with an image of the sociolinguistic regime in that area, including what language or languages are used, in what combinations and configurations, in what form (standardized vs. grassroots) and using what media (billboards, sign, notes, graffiti, etc.). Such regimes, in the case of Eritrea, can be connected to the country's language and language-in-education policies. These were established after independence and first of all stipulate the equality of all nine Eritrean languages, the use of Tigrinya and Arabic as the working languages of the government, the principle of mother tongue education, i.e. the freedom of choice on the side of the parents to send their children to a school that uses the home language of the child as a language of instruction, and the use of English as a general working language and as a language of instruction as of middle school (year six).

A second main characteristic of linguistic landscaping as we see it is its potential to give a historical dimension to sociolinguistic analysis. Linguistic landscape data not only reflect contemporary language regimes but they also include traces or remnants of earlier episodes in which the sociolinguistic fabric of society looked totally different and the ensemble of languages in public space was a reflection of the historical whereabouts of the country. In Asmara, this is, for example, visible in Italian, English and some damaged and painted-over texts in Amharic, referring to the period of Italian colonization (1889–1941), British protectorate (1941–1952) and Ethiopian rule over Eritrea (1962–1991). By studying the linguistic landscape in a historical perspective, we can better understand societal developments and transformations that shape a country's image.

Finally, we think it is important to stress here that linguistic landscape data are naturalistic data, i.e. they are not indirectly constructed or gathered by using questionnaires or surveys but exist and can be directly observed in real life. Applying an ethnographic approach in collecting and analyzing naturalistic linguistic landscape data as advocated by Blommaert and Maly (2016), includes dealing with the intentions of the producer or sender of a specific sign, the uptake of that sign by its intended – or not intended – audience or receiver and the position of the sign within the totality of the multilayered sociolinguistic environment where it is located. In other words, how signs are positioned and how particular resources are used to shape these signs in patterned ways, gives as a truly 'historical' insight, going beyond merely counting and without necessarily having to go into classic ethnographic tenets such as interviewing, deep hanging out and so on. The history of signs is observable in their patternedness. Signs, in other words, point toward the past, i.e. to their origins, conditions and modes of production, toward the future, i.e. to their audiences and uptake, and toward the present, i.e. to the sociolinguistic context or emplacement in which they are located. By using these three axes or arrows (backward, forward and sideways) it is possible to understand the social function and semiotic scope of public signs.

Before we illustrate the historical possibilities that linguistic landscaping offers, we need to take on board a sketch of the sociohistorical position of the object of our study: English in Eritrea.

English in Eritrea

Eritrea was under Italian, British and Ethiopian control for almost a century until 1991, when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the main group fighting Ethiopia for the independence of the country, finally gained control of the territory and, with UN support in 1993, declared it sovereign. Immediately, the government started to implement many of its social policies formulated partly already during the independence movement. One of these is the multilingual education policy (Asfaha,

2015). Under this policy, all nine languages of the country are the media of instruction in the first five years of education in respective regions where they are spoken. In middle school (starting year six) and in subsequent secondary and higher-level education, the medium of instruction is English. To prepare children for English medium education, it is provided as a subject during the five years of primary education. The role of English in education in Eritrea is very important as learners' ability to progress in their education is dependent on their ability to master the language.

English was introduced into Eritrea by the British military administration (1941–1952). During this period, English was adopted as the language of education in all post-primary and higher education (Wright, 2002). It has maintained this central role in post-primary education in the country ever since. English, described by Woldemikael (2003, p. 123) as 'a neutral language without a strong social or political base in Eritrea', serves in international business and communication of public institutions (such as Ministries), big commercial enterprises (such as banks, insurance, retail, etc. companies) and multinationals (such as construction, mining, etc. companies). Outside these and outside educational settings, there is little occasion to speak, use or even encounter English in a social setting (Walter & Davis, 2005).

Therefore, despite the ostensible absence of statements on official language(s) in policy documents, in practice, public, commercial and educational institutions operate or are expected to operate in English. In private or state-owned commercial enterprises, memos, letters, operational manuals, proposals, financial statements, etc. and in educational settings textbooks and teacher guides are all prepared in English. However, interactions of civil servants with the public and in-house communications of public offices are mainly conducted in Tigrinya, one of the two working languages of the government (the other being Arabic). Rules, regulations and proclamations from government offices are usually printed in Tigrinya, Arabic and English. Despite this institutional support to the use of English, low levels of proficiency are a concern, particularly in the education sector (Walter & Davis, 2005).

Linguistic Landscape Research in Asmara

The 2009 Study: 'English makes us look good'

The visibility of English in the linguistic landscape of Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea, has been investigated for the first time in 2009 when two Tilburg University MA students examined the signs in the city's main street Harnet Avenue (De Poorter, 2016; Vormeer, 2011).⁴ In her analysis of 361 signs including nameplates, writings on information boards, wall/window paintings, posters, etc., De Poorter (2016) found that English-only signs accounted for about 30% of the total number of signs collected. Similarly, in Vormeer's (2011) study, about 40% of the

202 signs collected were in English only. Both studies have found that above 75% of all collected signs in the surveyed street contain English language. In official public signs, such as name plates of ministries, other public institutions and street names, we generally see the fixed order of Tigrinya, Arabic and English reflecting Eritrea's post-independence language policy (Figure 4.4).

English is also found in places for tourists and foreign visitors like hotels, bars, restaurants, travel agencies and cinemas, as well as in shops that sell leisure products like music and movie DVDs and CDs. A collage of shop signs can be found in Figure 4.5. They all combine Tigrinya, Arabic and English, and therefore, have local as well as foreign customers as their audience.



Figure 4.4 Name plate Harnet Avenue, Asmara 2009.



Figure 4.5 Collage of signs in Harnet Avenue, Asmara 2009.

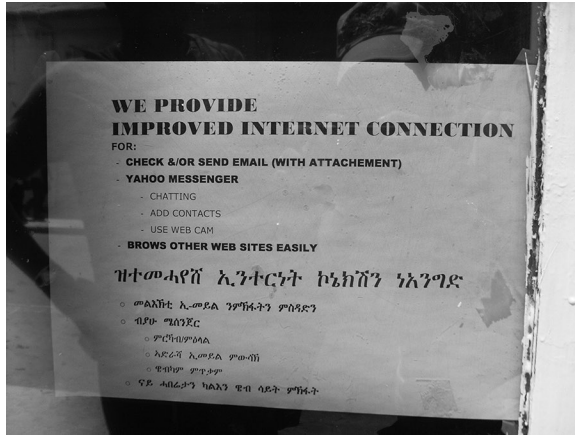


Figure 4.6 Internet advertisement, Asmara 2009.

English in commercial signs is mainly found in relation to technical equipment like computers, printers, cartridges and PC programs. An interesting internet advertisement in English and Tigrinya can be seen in Figure 4.6.

Not only does it say that ‘improved internet connection’ is provided, it also spells out in verbatim text what can be done on the internet: checking and sending email messages (with attachment), using Yahoo messenger for chatting, adding contacts and using the web cam and browsing other websites easily. The explicitness of this advertisement, basically explaining the obvious, is a clear reflection of an early phase of digitalization in which customers still need a lot of explanation.

In addition, De Poorter’s analysis revealed the ‘grassroots’ nature of the English language used in producing these signs, showing deviations from standards in spelling, word choice, grammar, etc. Some examples here are the ‘extra’ *A lapizma* to a meal of *Chips* and *Hamberger* (sic) on the American Bar menu, referring in a more or less Italianized or Frenchized spelling to ‘à la Bismarck’, i.e. the German cuisine specialty of having a fried egg on top of a meal and *Riffil ink* (*Cartilage*) referring in phonetic transcription to ‘Refill ink Cartridges’ on a commercial sign. As such phonetic spellings did not seem to hamper communication, the value of English in these multilingual signs, was assumed to establish a symbolic association to the prestige of this global language. Like the manager of the Pizza and Spaghetti House, an Italian restaurant in the center of Asmara, in an interview said ‘English makes us look good’ (Asfaha, 2009b, p. 217; see also Vormeer, 2011, p. 46).

Eritrea’s recent diplomatic and political history may bear the responsibility for at least some of the visibility of English signs in Asmara. During

the 1990s, after Eritrea's formal independence, expatriate communities gradually increased in numbers as foreign missions, aid agencies and multilateral organizations were opening offices in the capital. Immediately after the country's border war with Ethiopia ended in 2000, a contingent of UN peacekeepers from, initially, mainly European countries descended on Asmara. These surges in expatriate community numbers may have initiated the overreliance on English in the linguistic landscape in Asmara. With the closure of the UN peacekeeping mission and subsequent diplomatic isolation of the country and departure of some foreign missions, development aid agencies and NGOs, the visibility of English might be expected to have declined. However, as we will see, recent 2016 linguistic landscape data of the same main street in Asmara revealed the visibility of English again and the emergence of multimodal symbols of globalization, in particular, symbols associated with Internet. Nonetheless, as Vormeer (2011) clearly stated, the applicability of these findings from the main street in Asmara to the rest of the city and the country and their strength to explain recent national issues has to be further studied. In addition, the implications of the high visibility of English in the streets to classroom language instruction in Eritrean schools have to be further examined (Asfaha, 2009a).

The 2016 Study: @

Bearing in mind Blommaert's (2013) plea for including a historical dimension in sociolinguistic research, we decided to go back to the field for another round of data collection in Harnet Avenue.⁵ This would permit us to establish a longitudinal perspective on the linguistic landscape comparing 2009 and 2016 data of the same street. Our preliminary expectations when embarking on this study were closely related to contemporary developments in Eritrea. Central to these expectations was the international isolation of the country and allegations of human rights violations, and as a result, large numbers of its citizens seeking asylum in countries all over the world (UN CoIE, 2015, 2016) and, on the other hand, the diminishing numbers of foreigners – be it tourists, businessmen, representatives of NGOs, international agencies and foreign governments – visiting and staying in the country. We expected that less international travel, contact and presence of foreigners in Eritrea would have sociolinguistic consequences, i.e. a diminishing presence or even vanishing of English in the country's linguistic landscape.

Our findings, however, did not confirm our expectations. We still found the 'old' official English in trilingual signs referring to, for example, governmental institutions. We also still found tourist English in restaurants, bars and shops. This shows that fixed and official linguistic landscapes are rather robust and stable phenomena that do not necessarily show a one to one relationship with societal transformations but

might reflect a ‘historical’ state of affairs, i.e. in the case of Harnet Avenue, the reflection of an earlier presence of a substantial international clientele. Without paying attention to the backward axis in linguistic landscaping, such petrified or fossilized signs might give a wrong impression of the actual sociolinguistic situation in an area. Compare the Indonesian border signs dating back to the period of Indonesian occupation that can still be found in Timor-Leste’s District of Lautém but that meanwhile became obsolete (Da Conceição Savio, 2015).

What we also still found in Harnet Avenue was commercial English (and Tigrinya), at first sight still mainly referring to computer-related technical equipment, just like in the 2009 study (see Figure 4.7).

A closer look, however, at these signs showed that they clearly underwent a change of focus. We found quite some Internet-related advertisements in English that reflect a further refinement of global Internet infrastructures. It’s no longer a matter of advertising technical equipment or using extensive and wordy advertisements to explain, for example, what can be done with specific software such as ‘Word’ or ‘Office’. In addition to hardware and software advertisements, the focus now seems to be on what we would suggest to call symbolware, i.e. the use of international logos and icons to refer to products like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Google. Also free video, call and chat services like Viber, Imo, Tango and Messenger are prominently advertised with mainly their logos and/or names (Figure 4.8).

Such products apparently no longer need lengthy explanations in Tigrinya or English since they are now a well-known part of a no longer



Figure 4.7 Technical equipment, movies and songs, Asmara 2016.



Figure 4.8 Symbolware, Asmara 2016.

nichified, much more accessible new market that is inhabited by a new audience, i.e. Eritrean citizens wanting to connect to the outside world (including the worldwide Eritrean diaspora) through the Internet. What we see here is that Eritrea's offline isolation leads to a globalization of online infrastructures through which people from the margins of East Africa manage to become globally connected.

This is very nicely shown in the iconic picture in Figure 4.9 that kind of reflects all the above considerations.

Figure 4.9 represents a very interesting ensemble of signs. First of all, in the middle, we see a sign pointing at the Internet Café on the first floor. The signs only says *Internet Café Esrom* with an arrow pointing at the first floor of the building where the balcony has the same sign (not really visible here). The building also hosts a pension – *Imberemi Pension* – with a name plate above the entrance door in Arabic, Tigrinya and English; note that this is not the usual order of the languages on public signs. Just below the balcony, we see the *Aljewbar* gold and silver workshop with a mainly Arabic and Tigrinya name plate. At the right side of the building is a traditional 'notice board' with Tigrinya heading, full of handwritten and printed notes, obituaries and little advertisements, mainly in Tigrinya. The façade of this building is a clear example of the multilayeredness of the linguistic landscape in Asmara: traditional Tigrinya-only grassroots literacy products on a public notice board, bilingual Arabic and Tigrinya and trilingual Tigrinya, Arabic and English signs go together with an English-only sign with a big @ as its most prominent feature. The façade combines old and new and represents a variety of historically determined layers of literacy that all fulfill the semiotic ambitions of their producers and their intended audiences. The



Figure 4.9 Internet Café, Asmara 2016.

visitors of Esrom Internet Café constitute an audience that doesn't need extensive explanation nor trilingual signs. The combined use of Tigrinya, Arabic and English makes clear where we are, i.e. in a marginal place in Africa. The @, on the other hand, is enough to communicate what this place is all about: being online connected to places that are hard to reach offline – unless one chooses to travel outside. The fact that Esrom Internet Café in Asmara is on Facebook⁶ shows that globalization on the margins is not only a matter of individual aspiration but also of institutional investment and entrepreneurship opening digital pathways to the world.

Conclusion

Our historical journey through Asmara's linguistic landscape gives rise to a number of conclusions. First of all, we think to have shown the usefulness of including a historical dimension in linguistic landscaping. It enabled us to engage in what could be called an archaeology of signs, i.e. getting access to historically consecutive layers of semiotics that refer to specific stages in Eritrea's history. This includes signs that originated from specific historical epochs with specific language policies. All these signs together now constitute the multilayered linguistic landscape of Asmara. It comes as no surprise that in this landscape we find petrified or fossilized signs as well as signs that still are in different stages of physical erosion. A second historical aspect relates to the patternedness of

the semiotic resources that can be found on a growing number of signs. Icons like the Facebook, Google, Imo and WhatsApp logos encapsulate meanings that before had to be written out in verbatim text. Taken as resources, composed together in one sign, these images represent a globalized digital narrative. Throughout time and space, these re-composed signs represent different historical patterns of digital development in Asmara, with English hinging along to fill the gaps the symbolware still leaves.

Our linguistic landscape analysis further made clear that the specific local consequences and features of globalization are developing in a stochastic way. In other words, adding specific elements from globalization does not necessarily lead to a predictable outcome. In an internationally isolated country like Eritrea, one would probably expect limited digital access and low online participation of Eritrean citizens. What we however found is a rather stable Internet that is not visibly censored by the government, that is financially affordable and that is moreover broadly advertised. This means that a country's marginality and isolation not necessarily prevent its inhabitants from digitally participating in globalization phenomena. The main difference between the 2009 and 2016 linguistic landscape signs that invite people to go online is that in 2009, the possibilities of the digital revolution still needed extensive explanation and information, whereas for the 2016 audience, a simple @ is enough to advertise Internet access.

Notes

- 1 See: www.theguardian.com/technology/datablog/2012/apr/16/internet-censorship-country-list.
- 2 At this conference Sjaak Kroon and Chefena Hailemariam presented a paper on multilingualism and language policy in Eritrea as part of Hailemariam's PhD research (see Hailemariam, 2002; Hailemariam, Kroon & Walters, 1999). The pictures were taken by Kroon.
- 3 The visit took place as part of Yonas Mesfun Asfaha's PhD research on literacy acquisition in multilingual Eritrea (see Asfaha, 2009a). The pictures were taken by Kroon.
- 4 We want to thank Debbie de Poorter and Marijke Vormeer for making their data available for this chapter.
- 5 The 2016 data were collected by Yonas Mesfun Asfaha.
- 6 See: www.facebook.com/Esrom-Internet-Cafe-267821446924166/.

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