

Linguistic Landscape in the West Bank: Road Signs as Manifestations of Occupation

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Abstract

This study investigates road signs put in place by Israel in Area C in the occupied West Bank. It discusses how language on road signs in the West Bank serves as tool that enforces Israeli dominance over the area and blurs the Palestinian existence. This dominance is reflected in the excessive placement of 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. In addition, this paper demonstrates how the exclusion of Arabic from road signs, especially brown signs referring to tourist attractions, serves as a barrier that aims at limiting Palestinians' access to some parts of the West Bank and shows Israeli discriminatory practices against Palestinians. Moreover, this paper explains how warning signs at Israeli checkpoints construct the concept of the "Palestinian islands" by dividing the West Bank into disconnected enclaves surrounded by an ocean of Area C making the idea of establishing an independent Palestinian state seems impossible. Finally, this study records instances of Palestinians' resistance to Israel through vandalism of signs that were placed by the Israeli authorities in Area C. In this study, a total of 165 signs in Area C were recorded and analyzed with taking the name of the city, town, or settlement on signs as the unit of analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1967, the West Bank fell under the Israeli control. Since then, seizing lands to build settlements, military bases, and roads has not stopped. Consequently, Palestine is internationally recognized as an occupied state. In 2016, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 2334 which states that "the establishment by Israel of settlements in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, has no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law" (p.2). In this sense, Israeli occupation is reflected in building and expanding settlements, confiscating lands, and establishing checkpoints and military bases in the West Bank. However, the occupation of the West Bank has another dimension, that is, a symbolic one reflected in the linguistic landscape (LL) of Palestinian territories controlled by Israel.

This paper aims at examining road signs put in place by Israel in the West Bank, particularly in Area C, to address the following questions:

- 1) How do road signs enforce the concept of occupation and divide the West Bank into small, separate islands?



- 2) How does language choice on road signs play a role in limiting Palestinians' access to many parts of the West Bank?
- 3) How are Israeli language policies in the West Bank confronted by Palestinians?

2. Literature Review

2.1. An Overview of the Geopolitical Organization of the West Bank

The West Bank has gone through a lot of geopolitical changes since its occupation in 1967. The 'Deal of the Century', which was announced by Donald Trump's administration, is yet the most recent attempt to make significant changes to the geography and demography of Palestinian areas and to give Israel even more dominance over the West Bank. Nonetheless, the longstanding situation in the West Bank dates back to 1995 when Oslo II Accord was signed between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel. In line with this accord, the West Bank was divided into three areas: A, B, and C. Area A is administered by the Palestinian Authority, Area B is administered by both the Palestinian Authority, which is responsible for civil affairs, and Israel, which is responsible for security in these areas, and Area C is fully administered by Israel. Area A includes major Palestinian cities, and Area B includes Palestinian villages. Together, they comprise around 38% of the total area of the West Bank. The remaining 62% of the lands of the West Bank are labeled Area C, which includes Israeli settlements, military bases, roads, and strategic areas such as national parks. This situation created "an archipelago of disconnected enclaves separated by checkpoints of soldiers bent on reminding Palestinians who's in charge" (Shipler, 2002). Therefore, Palestinians travelling from one "island" to another have to pass through Area C where they could be stopped, searched, and sometimes arrested or even shot at any of the checkpoints scattered throughout the West Bank. Nonetheless, the majority of Area C is off limits for Palestinians on contrary to Israeli settlers who enjoy the freedom of movement in these areas. According to the Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics, there are 688,262 Israeli settlers living in 150 settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem (PCBS 2019), and the number of settlements and settlers increases every year. Therefore, areas under the Israeli control in the West Bank are continuously expanding.

Figure 1. The division of the West Bank. White areas represent Areas A and B whereas red areas represent Area C. (B'Tselem, 2013)

2.2. Overview of the Study of Linguistic Landscape

Laundry and Bourhis' (1997) seminal paper on linguistic landscape is one of the most heavily cited works in which they define LL as "The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings" (p. 25). Shohamy and Gorter (2009) provide a more general yet more comprehensive definition of the linguistic landscape as they define it as the study of "language in the environment, words, and images displayed and exposed in public spaces" (p.1). The study of linguistic landscape is not only concerned with signs, but also with the actors in a given landscape as Marten et al. (2012) demonstrate "linguistic landscape research not only studies the signs, but it investigates as well who initiates, creates, places and reads them" (p. 1).

Signs in public spaces are classified into top-down signs and bottom-up signs (Backhaus, 2006; Huebner, 2006; Cenoz & Gorter, 2006). Top-down signs are put in place by official authorities, and they usually adhere to official language policies implemented by governments. On the other hand, individuals or private institutions put bottom-up signs in place. Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) demonstrate that "The main difference between these two wide categories of LL elements resides in the fact that the former are expected to reflect a general commitment to the dominant culture while the latter are designed much more freely according to individual strategies." (p.10). Sometimes, language choice and order are governed by official language policies. For example, Ujvari (2021) points out that the law of signs introduced by Palestinian ministry of local government dictates that Arabic must be the most prominent language on signs of shops, and it must be placed above any other language. However, this law is not abided by Palestinian citizens. Scollon and Scollon (2003) introduce a third classification, that is, signs that violate the expected conventional semiotics such as graffiti.

Signs in public spaces have an informational function and a symbolic one (Laundry & Bourhis, 1997). On the one hand, signs are informational when they provide information on the linguistic characteristics, territorial limits, language boundaries of a specific region, or language diversity. On the other hand, signs are symbolic when they reflect the status of languages, power relations, and cultural identity, or when they symbolize "the strength or weakness of different ethnolinguistic groups" (Lado, 2011, p. 136). Top-down signs, which are usually governed by official language policies, are mainly informative. However, governments may "use language in the public space to deliver symbolic messages about the importance, power, significance and relevance of certain languages or the irrelevance of others" (Shohamy, 2006, p. 110).

In Israel, for example, the secondary status of Arabic is reflected in its exclusion from top-down signs in the Israeli-Jewish communities despite being an official language (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). In Upper Nazareth, the national identity of the city is reflected in the Israeli Jews' resistance to placing Arabic, a language symbolizing Arab identity, on signs (Trumper-Hecht, 2009). Despite the Supreme Court's decision to include Arabic on road signs in mixed cities, this decision was met with resistance on the part of the Jews. Symbolic messages can also be interpreted in terms of language prominence, which can be attributed to language order,

position, and font size (Gorter, 2008; Pavlenko, 2009; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). For example, Gorter (2013) demonstrates that placing Hebrew on top in signs of the Old City of Jerusalem after becoming under the Israeli control in 1967 is symbolic of the Israeli rule and dominance of Hebrew. Furthermore, Bigon and Dahamshe (2014) demonstrate that the “representation of Arabic language in the linguistic landscape of Israel is partial, sometimes confusing, and falls far behind representation of the Hebrew language in terms of transcript accuracy, toponymic salience, presence, and visibility” (p. 618). They claim that Arabic scripts on signs not only suffer from orthographic, phonetic and morphological problems, but also the Hebrew rules of morphology and phonetics are applied to them.

In the West Bank, the Israeli government administers roads in Area C. Therefore, all road signs are put in place by Israel, even in Palestinian towns partially located in Area C. Any action on part of the Palestinians in these areas, such as installing speed bumps, pedestrian bridges, traffic lights, or traffic islands, needs to be granted a permission from the Israeli authorities first. This being the case, Palestinians have no say regarding the content or design of signs. Consequently, the signs in these areas conform to the signs in Israeli mixed cities (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Ujvari, 2019); Hebrew is placed on top, followed by Arabic and English, respectively, giving Hebrew greater dominance compared to the other languages in these areas.

3. Methodology

This study investigates signs along the northern part of Highway 60, stretching from Ta’puah Junction south of Nablus city to A’naab checkpoint south-west of Tulkarm City. Research area, as can be seen in figure 2, is further divided into two parts. The red line shown on the map represents roads that Palestinians and Israeli settlers use for travelling. The orange line represents Huwwara, a Palestinian town 63% of its lands are labeled as Area C where approximately 7000 Palestinians live, and which settlers can travel freely through to get to their settlements. Red circles on the map represent checkpoints that Palestinians are allowed to cross in vehicles only. A total of 171 top-down signs were recorded along the 31.1-km investigated stretch.

In areas marked in red and at checkpoints, data were collected while moving in a vehicle, and some signs were recorded when possible. Prior to data collection, the researcher prepared a list of the towns, cities, and settlements in the area using Google Maps and Google Street View. Although the street view dates back to 2012, it is still a reliable source of data because no major changes occurred to the roads marked in red since then. After preparing the list, the researcher travelled through the areas marked in red and counted the signs that refer to Israeli settlements and Palestinian towns and cities. In the area marked in orange, there was no need for Google Street View because, first, the researcher could simply walk through the town and record every sign along the street, and second, the town’s roads went through a huge expansion work in 2014, so Google Street View is not reliable in this case. This study takes the name of the city, town, or settlement on signs as the unit of analysis. Therefore, a sign that includes two cities, for example, was considered two separate signs.

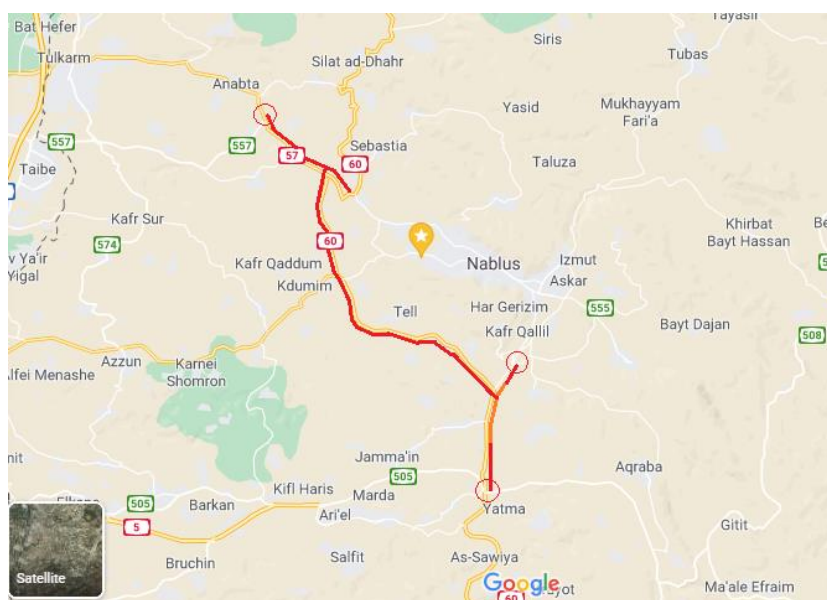


Figure 2. Research setting (Red lines represent streets, orange lines represent Palestinian towns, and red circles represent checkpoints).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Linguistic landscape and “de-Palestinianisation” of the land.

To anyone unfamiliar with the area, it almost feels like Palestinian towns do not exist when traveling through Area C in the occupied West Bank. This is because Palestinians are not allowed to put up their own signs that indicate the existence of their towns in these areas. As can be seen in table 1, road signs that refer to Palestinian towns and cities in the investigated area account for only 21% (n = 30) of the total number of signs, whereas signs referring to Israeli settlements and cities account for the remaining 79 % (n = 114)¹. Despite the fact that Palestinian towns outnumber Israeli settlements, signs that refer to Israeli settlements are three times more than those that refer to Palestinian towns and cities. For the sake of comparison, there are 62 Palestinian towns and villages in Nablus Governorate alone (PCBS, 2017) and 11 illegal Israeli settlements built on the lands of this governorate (PCBS, 2011).

Table 1. Road signs referring to Israeli settlements versus road signs referring to Palestinian towns in the investigated area (* indicates a major Israeli city).

Israeli settlements	No	No	Palestinian cities/towns
1. Shavei Shomron	8	15	Nablus
2. Ari’el	7	7	Tulkarm
3. Qedumim	11	2	Ramin
4. Enav	7	2	Beit Lid
5. Avne Hafez	7	2	Kfar Kalil
6. *Netanya	11	1	Einabus

¹ Signs of Jerusalem and Jordan Valley were excluded as they will be discussed separately.

7. Yitshar	9	1	Beita
8. *Tel Aviv	5		
9. Tapu'ah Junction	17		
10. Elon More	10		
11. Brakha	6		
12. Ma'ale Efrayim	2		
13. Beit El	2		
14. Itamar	2		
15. Shomronim	2		
16. Gav HaHr	1		
17. Kfar Sava	2		
18. Local Council Qedumim	2		
19. Bar-on	3		
Total	114 (79%)	30 (21%)	

The huge difference in the number of signs that refer to Israeli settlements versus Palestinian towns and cities is not arbitrary. These signs serve as a tool of occupation by metaphorically erasing the existence of Palestinian towns and enforcing the existence of Israeli settlements. Therefore, in addition to placing Hebrew on top, it can be said that the mere placement of these signs is symbolic of Israeli rule and dominance over Palestinian areas.

These signs do not have a symbolic function only. The former Palestinian Minister of Local Government Mohammad Jabareen explained, “The major obstacle is the Israeli occupation. It does not allow us to put street signs, especially on major streets and bypass roads in Area C, which are under full Israeli control; because they fear our signs will confuse settlers.” (Zabaneh & Hatuqa, 2015). This being said, Israeli settlers in the West Bank have more rights and privileges than Palestinians. These rights are not restricted to the freedom of movement and access to natural resources, to mention a few, but also the right of being aware of their surroundings. Palestinians travelling through Area C rely on their knowledge of the roads since signs are not always helpful, whereas Israeli settlers are always informed of their whereabouts due to the presence of signs referring to their settlements.



Figure 3. Road signs in Area C.

Another attempt to make the area look “more Hebrew” and “less Palestinian” is by replacing the Arabic names of some sites with Hebrew names written in Arabic scripts, that is, transliteration of Hebrew names into Arabic. In the investigated area, 15 signs of Jerusalem were recorded. In 9 of them, the Arabic name of Jerusalem city, Al-Quds (القدس in Arabic), was replaced with the Hebrew name Orshalim (ירושלים in Hebrew) as can be seen in figure 4. These signs of Jerusalem are especially found in the Palestinian town of Huwwara. In the remaining 6 signs of Jerusalem, the Arabic name is placed in parentheses next to the Hebrew name and is written in smaller font size, as can be seen in figure 5, making the Arabic name less prominent than the Hebrew one.

Figure 4. Road signs of Jerusalem and Tapu'ah Junction in Huwwara.



Figure 5. A road sign of Jerusalem on the Highway where the Arabic name is placed next to the Hebrew one.

Jordan Valley is another example of transliteration of names of sites from Hebrew into Arabic. As can be seen in figure 6, the Arabic name of Jordan valley (غور الأردن) is placed in parenthesis under the Hebrew name (בקעת הירדן).

By looking at these signs, it can be seen that only Arabic names went through the process of transliteration. If the function of the signs were informational only, original Arabic names would have been placed instead of Hebrew ones since settlers rely on signs written in Hebrew. However, using Hebrew names instead of the original Arabic ones serves as a reminder to Palestinians of who is in charge of the area and aims to sever Palestinians' connections to these particular sites, especially Jerusalem, which is, to every Palestinian, the capital of Palestine. Abaher Al-Sakka, a professor at Birzeit University demonstrates that “The most eminent danger is when the colonial terms are used by individuals and their occupation, and another danger is erasing the memory of the place connected to the original owners of the land by using names that serve the interests of the colonizers, and this means the ultimate success of the colonial project” (Zabaneh & Hatuqa, 2015).



Figure 6. A road sign of Jordan valley.

“De-Palestinianisation” of the West Bank is not limited to top-down policies. There are several bottom-up practices that attempt to enforce the Israeli existence in the West Bank, among which is the deletion and overpainting of Arabic spelling of sites. The practice of language removal is reported in Pavlenko (2008) in which she demonstrates that the de-russification of Latvia can be reflected in the deliberate removal of Russian, which is seen as a colonial language. In Area C, however, the situation is reversed. In areas near Israeli settlements, colonizers are erasing the language of the natives. As can be seen in Figure 7, the Arabic name on the bottom sign was erased. This particular practice is widely reported in Jerusalem city as an attempt to uproot the city’s Palestinian identity (Reiff, 2020).



Figure 7. A road sign in which Arabic is erased by Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank.

4.2. Road signs as barriers that limit Palestinians' freedom of movement and leisure.

In the occupied West Bank, almost every road sign is Hebrew-Arabic-English trilingual, except for brown road signs that indicate the existence of tourist attractions, national parks, campsites, historic buildings, or picnic areas. As can be seen in Figure 8, Arabic is excluded from brown signs.



Figure 8. Bilingual brown signs at Huwwara checkpoint south of Nablus.

In the investigated area, 5 brown signs were recorded, only one of them included Arabic. These signs are meant to limit Palestinians' access to the indicated areas by excluding Arabic. Tourist attractions, unlike settlements, do not necessarily carry Hebrew names. For example, Mount Kabir, shown in the bottom sign in figure 8, is a name of a mountain which, if translated into

Arabic, would still sound Arabic since *Kabir* means ‘big’ in Arabic. Therefore, Palestinians relying on road signs might think this area is accessible if Arabic is included. On the other hand, settlements usually carry Hebrew names that are distinguishable to Palestinians, and they know that going to these areas is forbidden and dangerous. This being said, the inclusion of Arabic in road signs referring to Israeli settlements is restrictive, whereas the exclusion of Arabic from signs referring to tourist attraction is restrictive in this case.

In short, brown signs put in place by Israel in Area C in the occupied West Bank reflect the discriminatory practices against Palestinians. Most of these sites are limited to Israelis and international tourists, whereas Palestinians are forbidden from entering these areas.

4.3. Signs as shorelines of the Palestinian “islands”.

As discussed earlier, Oslo II accord resulted in dividing Palestine into an archipelago, a group of disconnected islands. These islands, which are labeled as Area A, are separated by an ocean of Area C. All islands have shorelines, and the shorelines of the Palestinian islands are manifested in a red sign, shown in figure 9, that warn Israelis from entering Area A because it is “forbidden, dangerous, and against Israeli law”. These signs explicitly mention which areas are under the control of the Palestinian Authority, suggesting that other areas are not Palestinian and under the Israeli control, and Israelis are not prohibited from entering them.



Figure 9. A warning sign at Huwwara checkpoint, the southern entrance of Nablus city.

These signs reflect Israel’s policy in disconnecting Palestinian territories geographically to make them easier to control and to kill any hope in establishing an independent Palestinian state. After all, development of the Palestinian state is confined areas within the border of these signs that constitute around only 38% of the lands of the West Bank.

4.4. Contesting the Israeli landscape.

In the investigated area, especially in Huwwara, instances of graffiti, overpainting and vandalism of signs were recorded. Signs put in place by Israel were overpainted and vandalized because they are seen as an extension of Israeli rule and dominance over the area. These acts by Palestinians demonstrate their resistance to Israeli policies and serve as means of contestation. In figure 10, the bottom and middle signs were overpainted with a statement that reads “The state of Beita”, and the bottom sign in figure 11 was vandalized. Beita is a town to the south-east of Huwwara which has been in constant confrontations with the Israeli forces since the beginning of 2021 to protest the establishment of a new settlement on Sabeih Mountain, a mountain to the east of Beita. Therefore, the residents of this town take the streets of Huwwara to confront and protest against Israeli forces.



Figure 10. Overpainted signs in Huwwara.



Figure 11. A vandalized sign in Huwara



Figure 12. Graffiti written by Palestinians that reads, “Sabeih Mountain is ours”

5. Conclusion

By looking at the linguistic landscape in Area C in the West Bank, one can tell that the majority of road signs refer to Israeli settlements and that the Arabic name of the most significant city for Palestinians, Jerusalem, was replaced with the Hebrew name or put between brackets to make it less prominent. Therefore, the Israeli rule and dominance over the West Bank is not only about taking lands and building settlements, but it also involves official language policies that aim at uprooting the Palestinian identity and giving settlers more privileges than Palestinians do. Erasing the Palestinian-Arab identity is not restricted to the practices of the Israeli authorities. There are many instances of removal of Arabic from road signs by Israeli as an attempt to make the land look “less Palestinian”.

The exclusion of Arabic from some road signs, namely, brown signs that refer to tourist attractions, is not symbolic of dominance only. It aims at limiting Palestinians’ access to these parts where Israeli settlers enjoy the freedom of movement and leisure. Consequently, Israel

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confines the Palestinian existence and freedom of movement within the border of red warning signs that can be seen at every entrance of Palestinian major cities. This, in turn, confines the Palestinian state and its development within the border of these signs, making it like an archipelago. These Israeli practices, however, do not go uncontested. As means of resistance, Palestinian protestors sabotage road signs put in place by Israel in Area C and use graffiti to write slogans that glorify resistance.

This study investigates the northern part of the West Bank, an area that has relatively less Israeli settlements compared to areas in the middle and south of West Bank. Thus, although the results in this study are representative of the general situation in the West Bank, it is recommended to investigate road signs in Area C surrounding the cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, and Bethlehem for more comprehensive results. In addition, further studies could investigate how Palestinian in the public space contests Israeli occupation practices, and how Palestinians use language and graffiti as means of resistance such as those at the separation wall.

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