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**Dissertation Title**

Trans-scripting, Localization, Neoliberalization: Script  
Practices and Policies in the Semiotic Landscapes of South Korea

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**TIRF Research Topic Investigated**

Language Planning & Policy



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**Final Report**

**Motivation for the Research**

My dissertation proposes and develops the framework of *trans-scripting*, which is designed to explore the role and purpose of scripts in the production and interpretation of public signs in local landscapes. Taking two major districts in the city of Seoul, South Korea, as the main research sites, the dissertation shows how scripts function independently and in concert with language(s) to produce particular localities, circumscribe select audiences, and commodify public spaces.

The *trans-* of trans-scripting reflects the translingual underpinnings of the conceptual framework. Translingualism rejects the traditional narrative of language as a discrete mental system of meaning, in favor of an understanding of language as a dynamic and ever-evolving repertoire of resources (Canagarajah, 2013). Within the translingual framework, named languages such as English or Korean are treated as socially, but not ontologically real (Lee, 2019a), and the exploration of motivations, incentives, and reasonings behind the social construction of bounded languages is a central concern of the field. Along the same lines, my dissertation looks at the social constructedness of script, and its role in public signage of a major metropolitan city. In arguing for a trans- understanding of script, I first isolate script as an independent semiotic resource, and then show how it can be used to transcend and blur the boundaries of languages and orthographies, in ways which are simultaneously both creative and potentially concerning.

Additionally, I use examples collected from the East Asian context to highlight several key oversights in current methodologies used for studying landscapes and public signage. At the core of the issue is the isomorphic account of language and script, which conflates the two elements in ways which often evade detection even by experienced scholars. Given that this isomorphic account is by-and-large the product of Western, alphabet-focused academic work (Choksi, 2020), it fails to capture the graphic and linguistic complexity common to most East Asian landscapes. More than this, however, the oversight

also translates into broader concerns of landscape and meaning-in-space research, where the categories of semiotic and linguistic meaning tend to be equally conflated in ways which obscure the social saliency and importance of individual resources.

The dissertation findings and implications operate across a broad and a narrow dimension. Broadly, by theorizing script as a semiotic resource with linguistic potential, the study attempts to resolve the methodological issues concerning the treatment and analysis of scripts in the production of public signage in landscapes. Narrowly, the study explores the use of scripts in practices of local Korean sign-makers and sign-interpreters, in parallel with the policies and regulations designed to circumscribe them. Within the narrow focus, the city of Seoul serves as a case study used to demonstrate the importance of script in practice and policy, and the research grounds for examining the viability of trans-script as a script-specific analytical and conceptual framework.

### Research Questions

This dissertation sets out to accomplish three interrelated goals: (a) describe the complexity of trans-script and the wealth of linguistic and semiotic resources used in the production of the landscapes of Seoul, (b) show how such complexity can be obscured through dominant linguistic and graphic ideologies embedded in overt and covert public policies, and (c) discuss whose interests such ideological framing and policing of practices serves the most. These three goals are formalized into three corresponding research questions:

1. Which resources and repertoires constitute the trans-script practices and products of sign-makers/interpreters in the semiotic landscapes of Seoul?
2. How do these trans-script practices and products, as well as related public policies, assist in the production of public spaces and the localization of semiotic landscapes?
3. What do the trans-script practices and products, as well as related public policies, tell us about the ideologies which underly the production of semiotic landscapes?

### Research Methodology

The data set consists of 1931 sign collected over a period of seven months, from September 2021 to March 2022, with additional site visits following the collection period. The data were collected using a modified 'walking' methodology (Stroud & Jegels, 2014), which emphasizes the situatedness and the somatic sensory experience of space as perceived by the researcher.

I used a Nikon COOLPIX P7000 camera as the main instrument of photography. When photographing a location, I took one picture of a prominent marquee or focus sign, and one picture of the storefront, usually from the angle from which the sign is visible if observed from the street. At the end of each walking session, the photographs were stored in separate folders on a Macbook Air M1 laptop as well as on a separate Cloud account, and labeled according to the location, date, and time of day.

To narrate the walking in the form of voice notes, I used the recording application on the Samsung Galaxy Note S20 smartphone. The voice notes consisted of general descriptions of the sensory experience of the space I was walking through, including smells, tactile sensations, temperature, overall visual experience of the location, and profiles of other pedestrians.

Finally, in assembling the corpus of relevant institutional and government documents, policies, and ordinances, I used the official websites of Jongno-gu (<https://www.jongno.go.kr/>) and Yongsan-gu (<https://www.yongsan.go.kr/>), as well as the website of the Korean Ministry of Legislation (법제처, rom. *beobjaecho*, <https://www.moleg.go.kr/>), which provides access to all laws and regulations currently in force. From the start, I was aware that these documents, while offering valuable insights, cannot be taken at face-value because it is difficult to "learn through records alone how an organization actually operates day-by-day" (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997, p. 47). For this reason, the policies are used primarily as means of

triangulating the rest of the data, and so provide “a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility” (Eisner, 1991, p. 110). The collection and storing of documents occurred parallel to the collection of landscape data, while the themes emerged in the process of comparing the two data sets.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings are presented in three individual chapters, each roughly corresponding to one of the research questions.

#### ***Trans-scription***

The implicit aim of the first research question was to prove the reality and presence of trans-scription in the public signage of Seoul. The chapter focused on the practice of trans-scription offers an extended analysis and discussion of representative sets of sample signs, which become gradually more complex in terms of their constitutive resources. Building up from signs that display trans-scription of just Hangul and/or the Roman alphabet, the samples become increasingly diverse, expanding to include Hanja, Kanji, Kana, Arabic, Thai, and other scripts, as well as a number of other semiotic resources, including icons, pictures, symbols, colors, and different aspects of typography. The resulting analysis shows that trans-scribing as a practice is not just creative and boundary-blurring, but also fairly ordinary and normative in terms of its distribution across the landscapes of Seoul. The patterns of connections between language and script which can be inferred from the signage suggest a fluid and relativized approach to linguistic categories, lending further support for a fundamentally translanguagual understanding of the language practice at work. The resources used in the process of sign-making are varied, complex, and layered, assuming a *rebus-like quality* across signs. The “correct” reading and interpretation of these signs, and the practice of “solving” these public rebuses, demands broad repertoires of resources, which encompass not only language and linguistic resources but also a number of other semiotic and sociocultural resources and affordances.

#### ***Localization***

At the same time, as the continued analysis shows, access to all these repertoires, resources, and affordances is not equally distributed across landscapes, implying the existence of a targeted “public” in the concept of public signage. Such asymmetry surfaces in different ways across signs, from purely semiotic trans-scripts, which delimit access to linguistic content to local sign-interpreters, to trans-scripts, which sever widely accessible linguistic content from its deeper sociocultural and semiotic indexing. In everyday interaction with signs in landscapes, such forms of inequality can be judged as mostly innocuous although they point to a potentially worrisome tendency of locking access to meaning in public signage behind resources that are difficult to obtain. For example, the ability to “correctly” read and interpret signage frequently demands forms of institutionally regulated “literacies,” and less frequently, privately regulated information and resources. In either case, however, the production and interpretation of trans-scripts often requires access to externally regulated services, which in turn, demand considerable socioeconomic capital and investment. As a result, resources in landscapes have the potential of not just reproducing and reifying existing gaps and disparities, but further magnifying them by restricting symbolic access to public space to certain populations. This potential is, of course, even more pronounced in the case of more vulnerable members of the public, including the elderly, individuals with disabilities and impairments, and other local minorities.

Moreover, the potential of script to delimit access to spaces is often deliberately deployed in public policy to localize a particular space in the form of a themed place. Thus, a locality such as the central Jongno district, is localized as a space of Korean history and heritage, where the use of Hangul is enforced in the public signage via the ‘Love for Hangul’ policy. In a non-Korean-dense space such as Yongsan district, on the other hand, the policies enforce the construction of a more diverse, cosmopolitan landscape, while

nevertheless restricting it both in terms of geography, and affiliated nation-state constructs. In other words, script is used primarily as part of a closed Herderian network of “one language, one people, one land” (Blommaert, 2010, p. 183) so that despite the apparent linguistic and semiotic diversity in the landscapes, monolingual and monographic ideologies are preserved and perpetuated.

### **Neoliberalization**

Such ideologies help maintain the Korean national myth of homogeneity across all layers of social meaning-making, while still allowing for incoming diverse resources to be commodified and deployed as part of what script policies brand as cultural ‘development’ (발전, rom. *paljeon*).

In discussing this seeming paradox of simultaneous script “preservation” and “development,” I adapt the notion of *neoliberal governmentality* (Rojo & Del Percio, 2020) to account for the simultaneous presence of global economic and local state interests in public practice and policy. Neoliberal governmentality resolves the apparent contrast between the centripetal state, which seeks to homogenize local practices, and the centrifugal market, which seeks to diversify local capital and labor. In terms of linguistic and semiotic resources and trans-cription as a practice and product, neoliberal governmentality explains how scripts, such as Hangeul, can be deployed to serve as both cultural artefacts and scaffolding for nation-state building and as a commodity, which is sold to visiting buyers and exported to different sites of interest. The neoliberal focus of such governmentality ensures that even when the bottom-up practices of individual sign-makers and interpreters veer away from the desired trajectory, they can nevertheless be reassimilated into the flows of the market as a profitable commodity, thus doing little harm to the imaginary homogeneity of the nation-state.

In South Korea, I label this matrix of national and neoliberal ideologies as Hanlingualism, to simultaneously emphasize the locality (‘한국’, rom. *hanguk*, ‘Korea’) and the inherent Herderian link to language which bespeaks the usage of script in the landscapes of the country.

### **Implications**

The implications of this research are divided into two categories: first, a set of narrow implications which concern the forms of script practice and policy enacted in the landscapes of Seoul, and second, a set of broad implications for the field of sociolinguistics and approaches in translanguaging, which concern the categories of linguistic and semiotic meaning in landscape analysis.

The set of narrow implications points to the need for the public and private education sectors to diversify language teaching principles, approaches, and methods by orienting to the needs of language learners living in contemporary urban landscapes. This implication does not refer to English education alone; on the contrary, it would be much more effective if a situated, translanguaging orientation to language and script was taught in classes on local languages. After all, what is changing most immediately, is the space around the learners. Rather than preparing learners for an abstract ‘global’ space, or instructing them in test-taking skills, language education in South Korea needs to incorporate more of what is happening in the local environment into the classroom content. This ties into the need for public policies to work toward easing individual access to the resources needed to interpret the increasingly diverse landscapes of public signage, which in turn implies a broad restructuring of language policies informing all branches of the local infrastructure, ranging from education, through legislation, to commerce, with education in particular playing a central role in the dissemination of a wider range of resources.

Finally, in terms of the set of broader implications, the dissertation argues that as (socio)linguists, we must seriously commit to thinking “of language semiotically” (Blommaert, 2010, p. 181), which means becoming better aware of how linguistic meaning interacts with semiotic interpretation of objects, and how individual repertoires of resources define and delimit routinized approaches to interaction. More broadly, thinking of language semiotically implies a need to return to the basics of semiotic thought, as variously outlined by Saussure and Peirce, and to more rigorously engage with the individual theories of



meaning and meaning production. Too often, contemporary multi- and trans- research invokes “linguistic” and “semiotic” description with no substantive application of the underlying theoretical and conceptual distinction in the analysis. Particularly in the analysis of practices and policies in public space, which carry implications for issues of social justice and equality, the categories need to be more than just trendy soundbites. The artificial division of “semiotic” and “linguistic” disciplines needs to be bridged in the research in order to provide more comprehensive, valid, and representative findings.

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