

When the Rubber Hits the Road: The Enactment of Well-Intentioned Language Policy in Digital vs. In Situ Spaces on Washington, DC Public Transportation

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Abstract : Washington, DC, is a city in which Spanish, along with several other minority languages, is prevalent not only among tourists but also those living within city limits. In response to this linguistic diversity and DC's adoption of the Language Access Act in 2004, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) committed to addressing the need for equal linguistic representation and established a five-step plan to provide the best multilingual information possible for public transportation users. The current study, however, strongly suggests that this de jure policy does not align with the reality of Spanish's representation on DC public transportation-although perhaps doing so in an unexpected way. In order to investigate Spanish's de facto representation and how it contrasts with de jure policy, this study implements a linguistic landscapes methodology that takes critical language-policy as its theoretical framework (Tollefson, 2005). Specifically concerning de facto representation, it focuses on the discrepancies between digital spaces and the actual physical spaces through which users travel. These digital vs. in situ conditions are further analyzed by separately addressing aural and visual modalities. In digital spaces, data was collected from WMATA's website (visual) and their bilingual hotline (aural). For in situ spaces, both bus and metro areas of DC public transportation were explored, with signs comprising the visual modality and recordings, driver announcements, and interactions with metro kiosk workers comprising the aural modality. While digital spaces were considered to successfully fulfill WMATA's commitment to representing Spanish as outlined in the de jure policy, physical spaces show a large discrepancy between what is said and what is done, particularly regarding the bus system, in addition to the aural modality overall. These discrepancies in situ spaces place Spanish speakers at a clear disadvantage, demanding additional resources and knowledge on the part of residents with limited or no English proficiency in order to have equal access to this public good. Based on our critical language-policy analysis, while Spanish is represented as a right in the de jure policy, its implementation in situ clearly portrays Spanish as a problem since those seeking bilingual information can not expect it to be present when and where they need it most (Ruíz, 1984; Tollefson, 2005). This study concludes with practical, data-based steps to improve the current situation facing DC's public transportation context and serves as a model for responding to inadequate enactment of de jure policy in other language policy settings.

Keywords : Urban landscape, language access, critical-language policy, spanish, public transportation

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