

Micro-Paper 38: *Geosemiotics*

Raúl Alberto Mora

Associate Professor, Education and Pedagogy Graduate Programs,
Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Sede Central Medellín | LSLP Chair

Defining the Term

Geosemiotics (a portmanteau of *geography* and *semiotics*) refers to the study and analysis of how multiple discourses (in the form of signs and multimodal texts) appear in particular spaces. Geosemiotics is also concerned with how these texts and discourses help create different social literacy practices. The goal of geosemiotics is to explore the diverse interactions with and through language in social spaces.

As an approach to qualitative and ethnographic research, geosemiotics studies the city, as opposed to just looking at its inhabitants, as the main object of inquiry. The premise for this approach is that signs (and texts) are an important part of the city and their mere presence requires specific ways to engage with them. Therefore, geosemiotics pays attention to local social and physical spaces such as the neighborhood, street walls, or shopping malls to seek how cities and their dwellers go about constructing literacy practices.

Geosemiotic analysis comprises three levels: First, researchers explore the resources that people use to interact in a certain place (*interaction order*). Second, the analysis revises of the visual features of a text and the qualities of the context where it appears (*visual semiotics*). Finally, there is the study of the aesthetic, environmental, and material considerations that influence the reading *of and in* specific spaces (*semiotics of place*).

Connecting it to LSLP

The idea of geosemiotics as the exploration of signs and messages in the city leans very close to some of the key concepts and research we are developing at LSLP. In particular, we find this idea very close to our notion of “the City as Literacy,” as we share the common interest of looking at texts in the city.

As geosemiotics favors the exploration of physical spaces, we find another point of convergence with our research. Our urban literacies research has studied places that the geosemiotics literature has favored, such as malls and graffiti. Although our concern lies directly in the use of second language resources, we have begun to explore geosemiotics as an addition to our existing research methodology and as complement to the analysis of some of the routes from our first two research phases.

Expanding Second Language Research

Recent trends in second language research are looking more carefully at the city as a site of language and literacy practices. Ideas such as geosemiotics, linguistic landscaping, and our own work on the city as literacy are opening new spaces to look at the emergence of English and other languages as organic phenomena that create more complex communicative configurations.

The field of second language research will therefore benefit greatly of these explorations of language manifestations outside of school settings to show once and for all that second languages are already ubiquitous and not just the domain of the language classrooms.

References

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