

# LANGUAGE OF SIGNS: EXPLORING THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF THE TORONTO'S FINANCIAL DISTRICT

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## ABSTRACT

The use of signage and place names in Toronto's Financial District is explored. The core question is, "How are signs used in the Financial District?" A thorough analysis of the linguistic landscape was conducted by interviewing four people, taking photographs of important signs, and referring to books and articles as needed. It was discovered that Toronto's Financial District had signs that could be divided into four categories -- informational, commercialized, branding, and informal. Of particular interest were branding signs, as they most directly shaped social perception. Branding signs included "Welcome" signs that established English dominance and commercialized Toronto's multiculturalism. The "Achieve", "Discover", and "Opportunity" sign series defined the Financial District community's perception of success. The Financial District logo helped to demarcate the area. Finally, the lack of informal signs indicated a controlled, regulated district.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

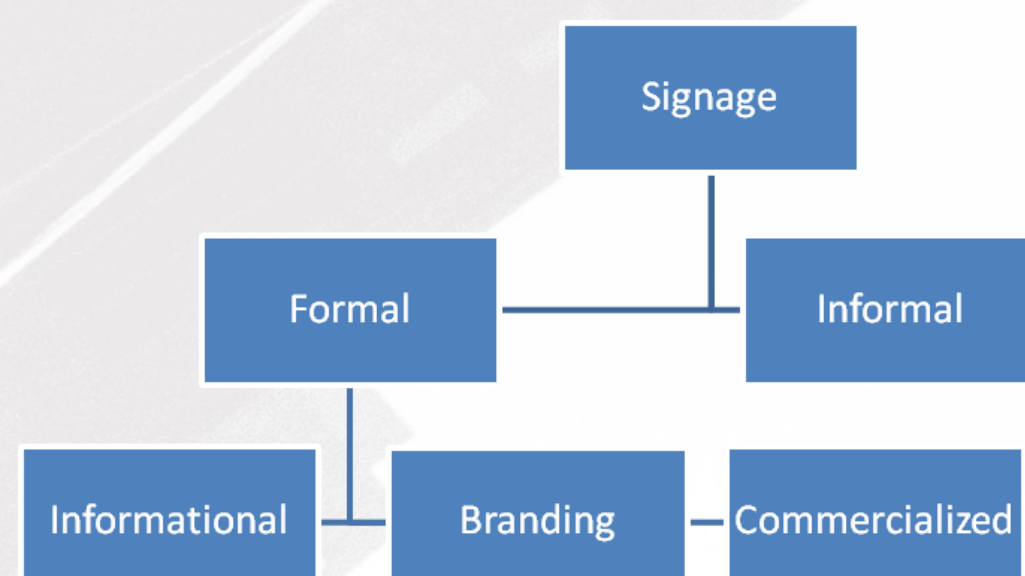
How are signs used in the Financial District? This included finding distinct signs, considering its implications, and discovering its use.

## METHODOLOGY

To answer the posed research question, I observed the linguistic landscape (defined as the language of signage in an area). I also interviewed four people, conducted additional research, and took photographs of important signs in the area.

The four people interviewed had different connections with the Financial District, which enabled comparison of their responses. Three of the four participants interviewed were approached as they walked around the Financial District area. Of the three, one was a student and the other two worked near the field site. The final participant was an employee at a firm in the area; the employee was asked for an interview by email and a time was subsequently scheduled. The four participants were audio recorded; informed consent was obtained.

## RESULTS



Various signs in the Financial District were noted. The signs were then categorized for further analysis.

## DISCUSSION / CONCLUSION

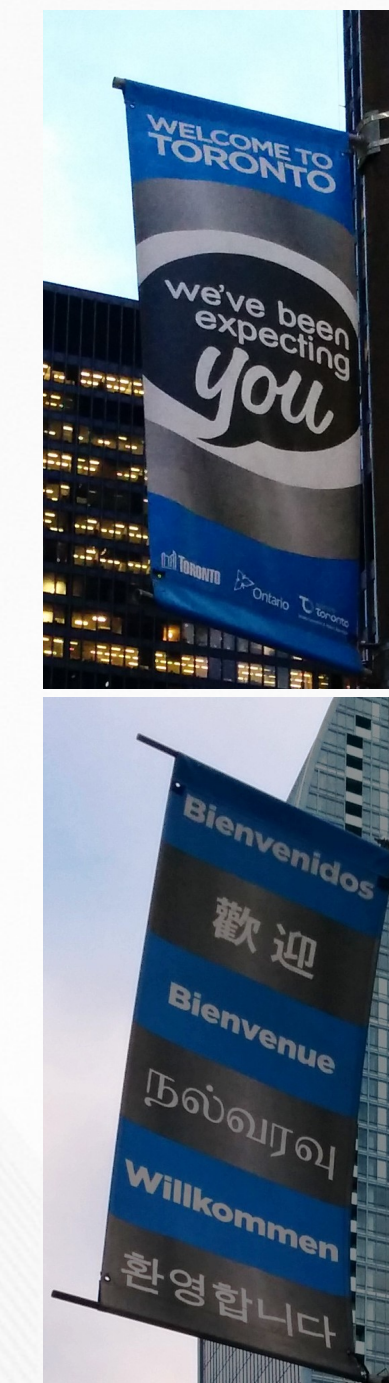


### FORMAL SIGNS: INFORMATIONAL AND COMMERCIALIZED

All informational and commercialized signs were in English, which is interesting as informational signs could have been bilingual. This indicated that everyone in the Financial District was presumed to be fluent in English.

### FORMAL SIGNS: BRANDING - WELCOME TO TORONTO

Another sign had "Welcome to Toronto. We've been expecting you" on the front, and various translations of the word "Welcome" on the back. This is an example of English dominance -- English is at the front of the sign, and since few people look at the back of signs, is presumed to be the most important language. Moreover, there is no translation on the back of the phrase "We've been expecting you". Some interviewees were frustrated that their native language was not included in the select few translations, whereas others felt it was unnecessary, as Toronto is already known for its multiculturalism. The latter interviewee perceived the sign as commercializing multiculturalism, targeting tourists and highlighting the area's openness to culture through signs rather than actions.



### INFORMAL SIGNS

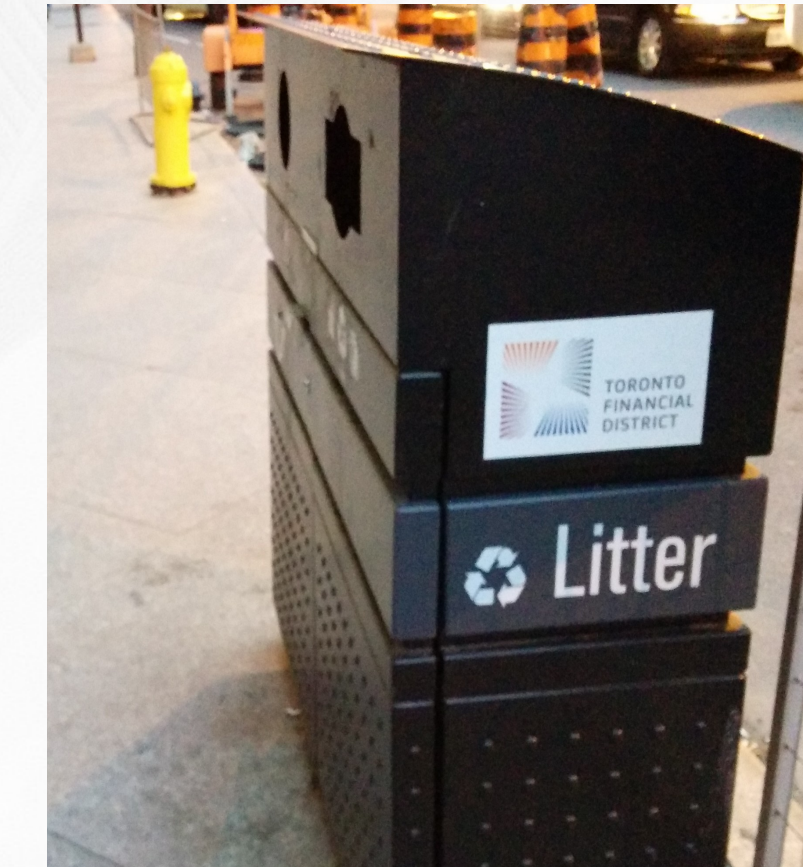


There are informal signs in the Financial District. Interestingly, it is challenging to see graffiti or other informal scribbles in the area. Graffiti as an art form is eerily absent, contributing to the aura of sterility. There are a few scribbles such as "LSD". The intention of the message may be to brag about drug use or to contest the space as designed for corporate use. The lack of informal signs overall index the control businesses have over the area -- the area feels formal and regulated.

### USAGE OF SIGNS

When providing directions, people who pass by the area are more likely to refer to buildings. People who belong to the Financial District community claim ownership to the buildings, and so would not use the buildings to give directions to a non-member of the community.

### FORMAL SIGNS: BRANDING - LOGO

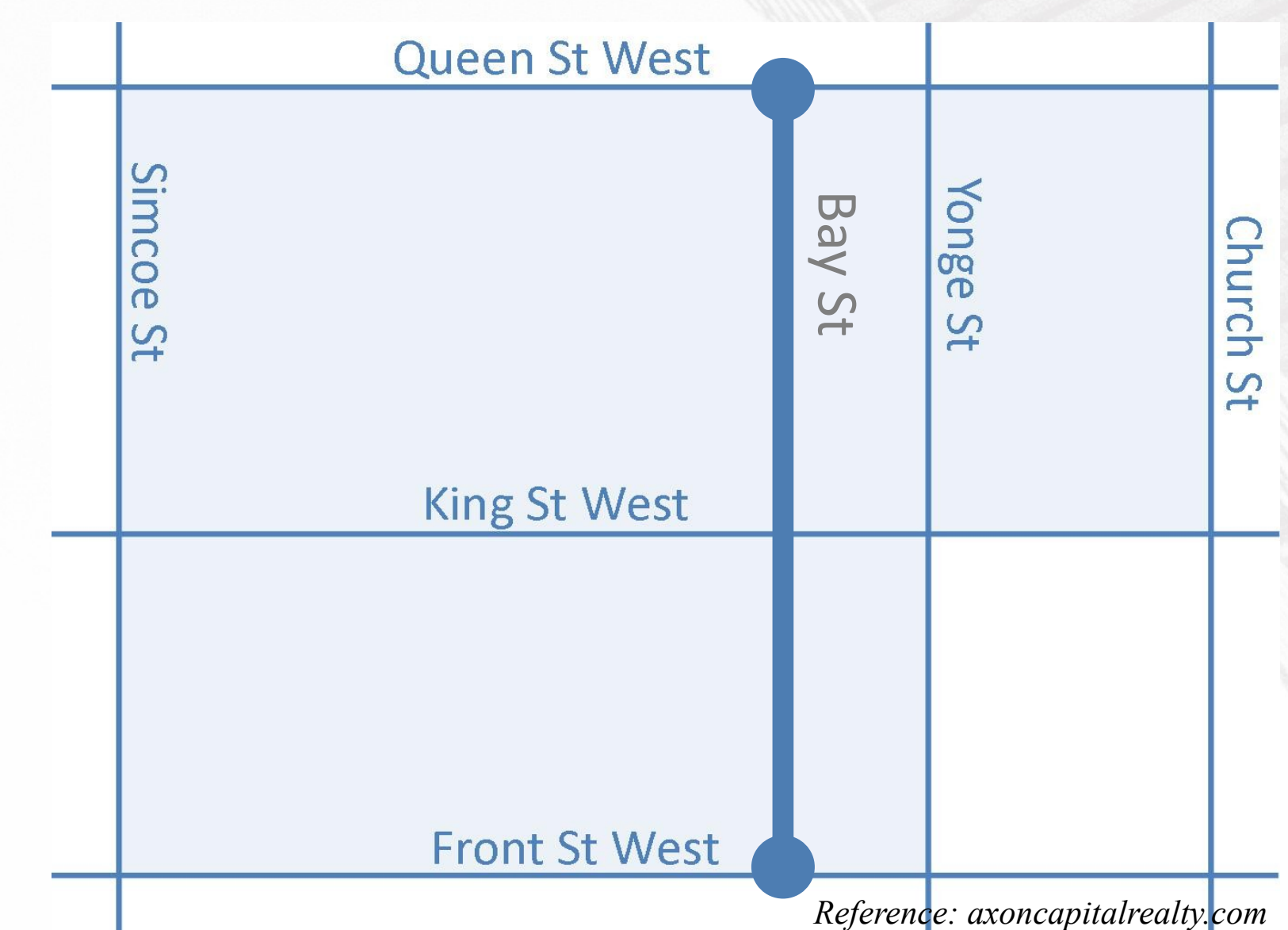
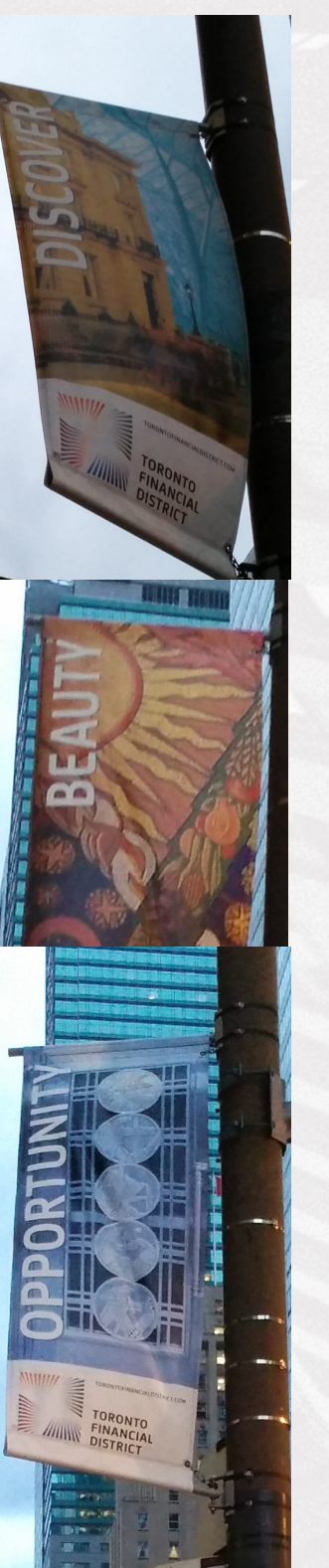


An important sign was the "Toronto Financial District" logo stamped on garbage bins and street names. Interviewees felt it attracted tourists, as though saying "Pay attention because this is an important area!" The signs demarcated the area, creating a boundary and indexing that the area is socially significant.

### FORMAL SIGNS: BRANDING - ACHIEVE, OPPORTUNITY, DISCOVER

There are a series of signs with key words (like "Achieve", "Opportunity" and "Discover") that mark the area. The response of the interviewee depended on whether they perceived themselves as being part of the community (that is, the community of people who work at or close to the Financial District). In general, interviewees who belonged to the community had a positive perception of the "Achieve", "Opportunity" and "Discover" signs. People who were not part of the community felt that the signs were exclusive and sometimes demeaning (in that the signs equated success with working at the Financial District, potentially deeming those who did not work there as 'unsuccessful').

The series of signs index affluence, especially the "Opportunity" sign. The sign has close-ups of Canadian coins. According to the sign, opportunities are mainly monetary, and there are many opportunities in the Financial District.



Reference: axoncapiatrealty.com