Learning your way around Bogotá on the bus system requires a course in ‘sign’ language as Karen Greiner finds out.

Learning how to read a bus sign in Bogotá took three weeks of interviews and some mental reconditioning. My first query was addressed to a ‘calibrador,’ one of the clipboard wielding men who log the times of passing buses and shout mysterious instructions to the drivers.

“When do you want to go?” His response, a question in lieu of an answer, was Germania, Usaquen, Centro, and Usaquen respectively. “This makes no sense,” I said, my exasperation evident. “Germania,” which is listed first, is near the center of the city, then “Usaquen,” which is in the north, next is “Center” which is back down south and lastly “Usaquen” which is at 45th and 7th. This sign makes no sense read top to bottom or the reverse. Wilmer replied: “It makes sense if you know the city.”

Alas, the simple truth: If you know Bogotá, the signs make sense. They are not illogical, they just aren’t linear. The words, numbers and symbols on the bus signs are like a language that is painstakingly learned over years of bus riding in Bogotá. When I began investigating bus signs, questioning friends and strangers alike, it became clear that there are more “fluent” in this language than others.

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Leida Arbelaez, a librarian at the Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avenido and a life-long resident of Bogotá, is a master philologist of bus language. She explained that the colors of the buses, and sometimes the colors of the signs, correspond with the company. Different companies have different routes. And different routes are served by different size buses. So beyond what is written on the signs, one can attempt to decipher the gestalt of bus color, sign color and bus size.

“So, what advice would you give to someone for taking the bus if they aren’t from Bogotá?” I asked Emperatriz, hoping to learn the secret logic of the bus sign directly from the source. “It depends.” She answered, her shoulders forming the same tentative shrug that was offered when someone says: “who knows?” I was temporarily disappointed with this answer. Then I realized that in failing to find the holy grail of bus logic I had learned a lot of other things about Bogotá. I learned that a nice-sounding neighborhood (Isla del Sol, Patio Bonito, Parque Botánico) doesn’t necessarily make for a nice bus ride. I learned that smaller buses are often faster because they fill up quickly and make fewer stops. I learned that neighborhoods in Bogotá are often named after well loved figures who have passed away, like Diana T., the journalist and daughter of former President Julio Cesar Turbay Ayala. But the most important discovery in my exploration of Bogotá’s bus sign language is a lesson that applies beyond Bogotá. It’s all about finding the ‘corridor’ you need,” said Francisco Miranda, Opinion Editor at El Tiempo. Fulbright fellow Bernard D’Amours said: “I have a theory: the larger the letters on the sign, the longer the bus stays in that area.” Carmen Fischko, a documenta ry filmmaker, thinks that it comes down to size. “When the letters are really big it means that alot of people are headed there.” When people don’t know the city, I give them the route number,” said Francisco Gomez, professor of graphic design. “No one uses the route number,” countered Camilo, drama student. Each person I spoke with had their own form of bus logic and used different reference points to navigate the city.

Still seeking clarification, I went to see a sign maker. Emperatriz Orbanco, the owner of Porky’s Publicidad in the south of the city, and confirmed one important piece of information. “The word in largest letters at the top of the sign is the final destination.” Final destinations are usually neighborhoods, shopping centers, parks or other recognizable institutions. She also explained that above the route number is often marked the name of the bus company and that the colors of the buses, and sometimes the colors of the signs, correspond with the company. Different companies have different routes. And different routes are served by different size buses. So beyond what is written on the signs, one can attempt to decipher the gestalt of bus color, sign color and bus size.

Anatomy of a bus sign

The Carrera Septima connects more than 170 bus routes in the city.