

Observatory's linguistic landscape: semiotic appropriation and the reinvention of space

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Abstract

Using a longitudinal ethnographic study of the linguistic landscape (LL) in Observatory's business corridor of Lower Main Road, the paper explores changes brought about by the influx of immigrant Africans, their artefacts and language practices. The paper uses the changes in the LL over time and the development of an "African Corner" within Lower Main Road, to illustrate the appropriation of space and the unpredictability, which comes along with highly mobile, technological and multicultural citizens. It is argued that changes in the LL are part of the act of claiming and appropriating space wherein space becomes summarily recontextualized and hence reinvented and "owned" by new actors. It is also argued that space ownership can be concealed through what we have called "brand anonymity" strategies in which the identity of the owner is deliberately concealed behind global brands. We conclude that space is pliable and mobile, and that, it is the people within space who carve out new social practices in their appropriated space.

Introduction

The neighbourhood of Observatory in Cape Town (South Africa) is one which offers a microcosm of multicultural agents, activities and practices in late modern South Africa. Although Dutch settlement in the Cape started in 1652 with the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck, extensive documentation of Observatory starts from early 1900s, thereafter followed by colonial occupation by the British. Evidence of Dutch colonialism is immortalised by the name "Liesbeek" Parkway indelibly etched on one of the main highways in Cape Town. The British later colonized the Cape as well, and it is at this point that John Young recounts the history of urban Observatory as commencing with massive in-migration from Britain:

Most of the immigrants who came to Observatory were British lower middle-class, shop-keepers, artisans and clerks. They made Observatory into a colonial home – from-home, copying many of the conventions and mores of the English bourgeoisie. (1998, 63)

At this point, there were large numbers of immigrants residing in Observatory, which included amongst others: Lithuanians and Jews. During this time, the area still permitted a handful of Indians and Coloured¹ tradesman to operate in the area, but segregationist

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