

Modified Road Traffic Signs in the South African Linguistic Landscape

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the linguistic landscape material of modified road traffic signs in different areas of South Africa, the article illustrates how modified traffic road signs continue to have situated contextual meanings regardless of altered physical placement or content. Drawing on semiotic repurposing this article argues for an extended definition of situated semiotics that takes into account repurposed signs. A fluid interpretation of ‘situatedness’ will broaden the scope of what is perceived as situated semiotics and discourage the use of delinquent categories such as ‘transgressive’ semiotics for ‘out of place’ semiotics.

KEYWORDS

Linguistic Landscape, Modified Road Traffic Signs, Semiotic Repurposing, Situated Semiotics, South Africa

A GLANCE AT ROAD TRAFFIC SIGNS IN LL & SOUTH AFRICA

Road signs form part of the initial broad signage categories included in Landry and Bourhis’s (1997) delineation of linguistic landscape (LL). For Landry and Bourhis (1997) LL consists of “[t]he language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs”. Gorter (2006) remarks that “traffic signs are usually an important part of the linguistic landscape” and further LL research can focus on the exploration of “the linguistic expressions on linguistic street signs and how [they] convey a certain meaning” (Gorter, 2006). Taking into account the significance of traffic signs, Gorter (2006) suggest that the LL scholarship would benefit from researching the work of traffic sign designers – gaining insight into “their opinions on how signs function, what ‘good’ signs are, and which criteria are used for the production of signs can be of relevance”. This paper focuses on traffic road signs that have been modified and/or removed from their initial placement. Consequently, this paper goes beyond merely exploring the linguistic expressions on road traffic signs; as South African road signs are multimodal in nature, this paper explores how linguistic expressions are used collaboratively with alternative modes for meaning making on South African road traffic signs. Concurring with Barni and Bagna’s (2015) perspective that ‘linguistic’ (in linguistic landscape) now “embraces the complexity of semiotic spaces as well, people as authors, actors, and users all of which is part of LL analysis”, this data presented in this paper challenges transport authorities as sole decision-makers and authors of road traffic signs and further problematises authorship in the LL field.

In South Africa, the placement, design and necessity of road traffic signs is dictated by laws stipulated in the National Road Traffic Act. The South African road traffic signs are divided into three classes which each have sub-classes: Class 1 is Road Signs; Class 2 – Road Markings and Class 3 – Road Signals (National Road Traffic Act, 1996). According to the National Road Traffic Act (1996), a road traffic sign has one of three purposes: a) to regulate (directs or discourages certain

DOI: 10.4018/IJSVR.2020010101

actions); b) to warn (signal attention to conditions on public roads that are potentially threatening) and c) to guide/inform (indicate destination, distance, location, facility etc.). The National Road Traffic Act and Regulations (2006) stipulates that “no person shall willfully or negligently damage any road traffic sign, or any other sign, signal, marking or other device, displayed in terms of this Chapter, or without proper authority remove it or alter the position thereof or the inscription, lettering, colour or marking thereof or thereon.” Regardless of this law, this paper contains numerous examples of modified road traffic signs whose content and/or design have been repurposed to serve alternative purposes. As the interpretation of traffic road signs is heavily dependent on the exact physical placement in the world, this paper argues for a boarder understanding of situated semiotics as suggested by Scollon and Scollon (2003) by demonstrating how modified road traffic signs are repurposed to serve a different meaning in contrast to what is typically considered ‘situatedness’ in the material world. Using linguistic landscape material from three provinces in South Africa, the Northern Cape, Western Cape and Gauteng, this paper illustrates how the ‘situatedness’ of regulatory signs is not immobile – regulatory signs can be moved and thus lose their ‘situated’ meaning. However, their mobility potential does not qualify them as decontextualized semiotics (Scollon and Scollon, 2003) even if the road traffic signs ‘appears the same’ in new context – their positioning in an alternative context warrants more than a mere indexical understanding.

THE SEMIOTIC REPURPOSING OF SOCIAL SITUATED SEMIOTICS

Repurposing as a conceptual framework stems from Bolter and Grusin (2000) who focus on the constant refashioning and borrowing between different forms of media. According to Bolter and Grusin (2000) remediation is defined as “the representation of one medium in another.” Bolter and Grusin (2000) state that there are various acts of remediation and the act typically most utilized today in popular culture is repurposing. Repurposing, a type of borrowing, describes the act of taking a property from one medium and reusing it in another. The content has been borrowed, but the medium has not been acknowledged as with reuse comes a necessary redefinition – a type of ‘new-ness’ (Bolter & Grusin, 2000).

Prior and Hengst (2010) extend the scope of remediation by proposing that remediation does not only focuses on how various mediums are refashioned among each other. Prior and Hengst (2010) argue the analysis of remediation should include “the range of semiotics that are present and consequential in interactions rather than taking single-mode analyses” (Prior & Hengst, 2010). Consequently, semiotic remediation draws attention to “the diverse ways that humans’ and nonhumans’ semiotic performances (historical or imagined) are re-represented and reused across modes, media, and chains of activity” (Prior, Hengst, Roozen & Shipka 2006). This type of semiotic remediation calls for the “understanding signs of all kinds as dialogic, not generated out of abstract systems, but drawn from a history of sign use, tuned to the present interaction, and oriented to future responses and acts” (Prior and Hengst 2010). According to Irvine (2010), “remediation (as suggested by Prior and Hengst) implies taking up some previously existing form but deploying it in a new move, with a new purpose”.

To date, there is a scarcity of LL research that explores and analyses the semiotic repurposing of signage in the semiotic landscape. Mokwena (2018) explores the repurposing of semiotic resources such as billboards and election campaign posters as building material in rural Northern Cape, South Africa. Banda, Jimaima and Mokwena (2018) explore how locals in rural Zambia draw on the distinctiveness of the Chinese script on signage and repurpose it for giving route directions instead of deciphering the meaning of Chinese script. Banda and Jimaima’s (2015) study of the Zambian ‘ruralscapes’ reveals how in the absence of written directional signage, locals repurpose various alternative natural semiotic resources (bushes, trees) and socio-historical knowledge (memory and lived experiences) in the oral navigation of space. Dowling (2010) provides a simplistic and brief analysis of how Khayelitsha residents in Cape Town recycle discarded material (CPT International airport

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