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# Commodification of African languages in linguistic landscapes of rural Northern Cape Province, South Africa

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**Abstract:** English has been portrayed in linguistic landscape literature as the definitive language of commodification. However, using linguistic landscape images from two rural communities in the Northern Cape, South Africa, this article shows how indigenous African languages and localised English are entangled as commodities – whether used independently or in hybridised form – for the sale of various goods and services. We show that the commodification of the languages and hybridised forms speaks to semiotic choices of local authorship of signage and to the influence of local communities’ languaging practices. We propose that commodity status of languages or their linguistic features is variable, since commodified languages or linguistic features as modes derive meanings from the assembled multimodal resources, whose design features as languages or translanguaged “blends”, and their statuses as being in and out of favour, depend on communicative purposes, the kinds of goods and services being marketed and the intended consumers. We conclude that languages, or their linguistic features as modes in signage, should be valued as mobile socio-culturally given and multimodally shaped semiotic resources deployed for communicative impact on consumers in local contexts of use.

**Keywords:** commodification, linguistic landscape, multilingualism, languaging, South Africa

## 1 Introduction

The understanding of a commodity as a socialized thing intended primarily for exchange stems from the thinking of Karl Marx (Appadurai 1986) and the early political economists who view commodities as “special kinds of manufactured

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goods (or services), which are associated only with capitalist modes of production and are thus to be found only where capitalism has penetrated” (Appadurai 1986: 7). Such a narrowly defined view of what constitutes a commodity needs to be revisited following the impact particularly of the local on the global. Coupland (2013: 3) argues that one of the effects of globalisation is “an upsurge in consumer culture and many new forms of commodification”. In this article, we aim to show that new forms of commodification do not have to involve (“standard”) English, nor are they a preserve of the modern or urbanising landscapes and associated exogenous modes of production whose design features are intended for the “upmarket” or tourist gaze, for example. The rural and traditional modes of productions are equally able to lay claim to commodification when it comes to offers of special kinds of goods and services in localised spaces.

The use of English in public signage, particularly commercial signage, has come to be associated with “modernity, internationalism and technological advancement” (Gorter 2013: 202). Due to these symbolic associations, English has often been described in the literature as commodified language at the expense of local languages. However, drawing on business advertisements in the linguistic landscape (LL) of the Northern Cape, this article shows how local languages can also be commodified. It seeks to show that the symbolic value of English as the definitive language of commodification depicted in the literature is not universal. In contexts such as the Northern Cape, English has to compete with Setswana and Afrikaans in the LL, as the local people are more literate in and tend to use the latter two languages more in their everyday interactions than they do the former. In this connection, the article aims to show that in the rural LL of the Northern Cape, Setswana and Afrikaans are valuable commodities as languages of marketisation. In addition, where English is used, it is often localised to take Bantu language morpho-phonology blended with one or the two local languages for aesthetic and marketisation purposes in business advertisements.

## 2 Commodities

Central to Appadurai’s (1986: 3) conceptualisation of what qualifies as a commodity is his argument that commodities have social lives. He argues that definitions that account for commodities as “objects of economic value” or describe a commodity as “anything intended for exchange” are problematic. Such definitions are primarily troublesome due to the various subjective interpretation of what can be considered as “valuable” and the different types of “exchanges”. Consequently, Appadurai (1986: 13) proposes that commodities be

perceived as “things in a certain situation, a situation that can characterize many different kinds of things, at different points in their social lives”. Adopting this situation-dependent approach to commodities enables the exploration of “the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things” (Appadurai 1986: 13). In this conceptualisation, any language or meaningful linguistic features can be a commodity, depending on the situation. If commodities are things in a certain situation, the situation must either be conducive to harness the commodity potential of a thing or transform it into a commodity. Appadurai (1986) refers to this situation as a commodity situation. He states: “the commodity situation in the social life of any ‘thing’ can be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (Appadurai 1986: 13). The social contexts, including that relating to information exchange regarding exchange of services or goods, determine what “things” are relevant for marketisation purposes. As anything holds the potential to be a commodity, Appadurai (1986: 13) states that “things can move in *and* out of the commodity state and such movements can be slow or fast, reversible or terminal, normative or deviant”. According to Appadurai (1986: 14) “the commodity *candidacy* of things refers to the standards and criteria (symbolic, classificatory and moral) that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social and historical context”. Lastly, the commodity *context* refers to the variety of *social* arenas, within or between *cultural* units that help link the commodity candidacy of a thing to the commodity phase of its career (Appadurai 1986: 13). Following the consideration of the significance of the commodity situation in the social life of a thing, Appadurai (1986: 16) concludes by defining commodity “as things that, at a certain *phase* in their careers and in a particular *context*, meet the requirements of commodity candidacy”. We can conclude from this that English cannot claim the monopoly of commodity candidacy in the multilingual contexts of Africa, the Northern Cape and South Africa in particular. This article shows how, not (just) English, but Setswana and Afrikaans move into commodity state, having met the socio-cultural requirements of the locals in the Northern Cape. That is, business owners increasingly recognise local languages as ‘things’ that can be transformed into commodities that in turn help to sell/advertise other commodities.

## 2.1 Commodification of language

According to Heller (2003: 474) the commodification of language refers to the process of “language being rendered amenable to redefinition as a measurable

skill” and consequently, “the understanding of language being a marketable commodity on its own”. Heller (2003) conducted an ethnographic study in the francophone areas of Canada in a bid to explore the commodification of language and authenticity as a consequence of the globalised new economy. Heller (2003) drew on a heritage tourism site and a call centre as her main research sites. In terms of the call centre industry in francophone Canada, Heller (2003: 483) mentions how language has been commodified through the intentional “hiring of bilingual representatives in a bid to maximize the client base”. Consequently, “language in the call centre industry is considered a skill” (Heller 2003: 485) – a skill used by potential employees to sell themselves, and a skill used by employees to service their diverse customer base. Heller (2003: 488) explains that the commodification of authenticity in the heritage tourism section of francophone Canada occurs through the “development of a unique francophone product, of unique interest to francophones, and under francophone control” in a bid to distinguish themselves from anglophones and indigenous groups.

In another study, using primarily signage from Washington DC’s Chinatown, Leeman and Modan (2009) focused on how the material manifestations of language in urban cities are influenced by extra-linguistic phenomena such as political and economic interests. Additionally, drawing on the symbolic use of Chinese in the linguistic landscape of Washington DC’s Chinatown, Leeman and Modan (2009) explore how minority languages with other multimodal design elements in the built environment are commodified and, together, are used to sell the city.

Kelly-Holmes (2000) draws on the Marxist notion of fetishism to analyse the use of foreign languages in European intercultural advertising. Drawing on examples such as the German slogan of German carmaker Audi and the use of French in a Chanel advertisement of lipstick, Kelly-Holmes (2000: 70) shows how language becomes a fetishised commodity so that “its utility or use value has become secondary to its symbolic value”. She argues that the decision to not translate “foreign” words in advertising results in the mystification and obscuring of language, as its communicative value is irrelevant (Kelly-Holmes 2000: 72). This commodified fetishisation of language in Europe’s intercultural advertising results in the symbolic association, such as German as a language associated with “engineering quality” and French as a symbol for “femininity, fashion and beauty”. Kelly-Holmes (2000: 76) notes that, in certain instances, intercultural advertising draws on “total fetish”. Total fetish describes the process where the language used has both communicative and symbolic value.

This is what Kelly-Holmes (2014: 135) was later to develop into linguistic fetish, which she describes as “the use of languages for symbolic (fetishised)



rather than utility (instrumental-communicative) purposes in commercial texts. She asserts that the concept of linguistic fetish was developed to explain multilingualism in economically driven displays, such as marketing and advertising texts (Kelly-Holmes 2014). Language can be used as part of the advertisement or LL; not just for its semantic content, but also for the way it looks. Using the notion of language display, she notes that languages constituting the visual multilingualism in LL can be seen as interconnected modes of meaning (Kelly-Holmes 2014).

### 3 Study context and methodology

The Northern Cape is one of the nine provinces of South Africa. Geographically, it occupies about a third of South Africa's land area, making it the biggest province. Its landscape is mostly desert and is characterised by vast, arid grasslands with outcroppings of haphazard rock piles. The province is rich in minerals, including alluvial diamonds, iron ore, copper, asbestos, manganese, fluorspar, semi-precious stones and marble (Local Government Handbook 2018). The 2011 Census indicates that three South African languages are predominantly used by the provincial population, namely Afrikaans (53.8 percent), Setswana (33.1percent) and isiXhosa (5.3 percent) (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA] 2011). According to the Local Government Handbook (2018), the province is divided into five district municipalities and further subdivided into 27 local municipalities. The data for this article was collected from the linguistic landscape of two of the province's district municipalities.

The first district municipality is the Frances Baard District Municipality (henceforth FBDM). Geographically, FBDM is the smallest district in the Northern Cape with a land area of 12,836 km<sup>2</sup>. This district municipality accommodates the largest proportion of the province's population, with a total of 382,086 inhabitants (Stats SA 2011). The city of Kimberley, which is the seat of the District Municipality and of the Northern Cape legislature, is located in the Sol Plaatje Municipality (FBDM website). John Taolo Gaetsewe District Municipality (henceforth JTGDM) formerly known as Kgalagadi, has a land area of 27,283 km<sup>2</sup>. It comprises 186 towns and settlements, the majority (80 percent) of which are villages. The province is home to Sishen Mine (in Kathu), which is one of the largest open iron ore mines globally. The iron-ore railway from Sishen to Saldanha is one of the longest iron-ore carriers in the world ([www.gamagara.gov.za](http://www.gamagara.gov.za)).

According to the Local Government Budgets and Expenditure Review (2011), the rural municipalities of South Africa are concentrated in four provinces: Kwa-

Zulu Natal, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape and Limpopo. The municipalities in these three provinces are predominantly characterised by small towns, communal land tenure, villages and scattered group of dwellings. The rural landscape includes mountains and plains, semi-deserts and humid savannas, as well as areas that include large settlements in the former homelands (The Rural Development Framework 1997).

This article forms part of a larger ethnographic study conducted in the abovementioned district municipalities from December 2015 to July 2017. The data herein results from a combination of two types of ethnographies: visual ethnography (Pink 2007) and material ethnography (Stroud and Mpendukana 2009). Androutsopoulos (2014: 86) states that “photographic documentation lies at the heart of LL data collection and basic hardware requirements such as a digital camera will prove adequate for photographic documentation”. A digital camera was used to take photographs of the material that form part of the landscape of the given environments. The photographic database for the larger ethnographic study and this article is more than 500 images, and 70 one-on-one interviews with local people recorded on a digital audio recorder.

Androutsopoulos (2014: 85) states that determining the unit of analysis in LL research is “closely related to the research questions and, at the same time, impacts directly on the photographic documentation to be carried out”. In line with Androutsopoulos’s (2014) view, the decision of which units of analysis to focus on, and which photos to use was influenced by the main aim of this article, which is to show the commodification of local languages (individually or hybridised with English). Thus, the seven images used in this article were selected because they have embedded semiotic material to demonstrate the commodification of languages in rural areas.

Where interviewees did not want to be recorded, notes were taken with pen and article. The languages used during the interviews were Setswana, Afrikaans and English, or a mixture of these languages. In the last case, linguistic features from the three languages are blended and used for communication purposes in what is called translanguaging. Otheguy, García and Reid (2015: 283) characterize translanguaging as the use of “a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages”. Some of the signage captured show translanguaging practices in which sign makers fuse linguistic features from the three languages to construct their messages.

We used the walking data collection methodology as used in linguistic landscape studies (Banda and Jimaima 2015) in which one of the authors “walked” about the study sites, sometimes with an interviewee, capturing images of artefacts and objects local people use for sign-making. Walking with

an interviewee enables the researcher to capture the signage while at the same time recoding oral narratives and insights of a place such as a shopping area, its history and the meanings of the written signage on the buildings and other places in the area. Walking enabled the researcher to move around the research sites and experience the same sensory, cultural artefacts, human activities and language practices constituting the semiotic landscapes as local inhabitants. The images captured through walking and the oral narratives of place from interviews gave us useful information about the local production and consumption of signage as well as insights about how we should interpret the signage we had captured. Following Banda and Jimaima (2015: 652) the researcher would ask for directions to some location in the rural site and would note the “features referred in order to navigate the place”. For example: “How do I get to the cement factory? If you have time, would you walk with me there?” In the case of signage written in English, Setswana and Afrikaans, it was important to identify which language or languages they referred to in giving directions in the multi-lingual signage, to uncover the language(s) constructed as important for meaning making, hence, as a commodity. Some questions were specifically meant to elicit local cultural knowledge and beliefs about particular signage. For example, in this article we show responses to a signage put up by a traditional doctor, who decided to advertise his services in Sesotho, a language not spoken in the area. The question the researcher asked the interviewees was: “Why do you think the traditional doctor wrote the signage in Sesotho? Why doesn’t he work on Tuesday?” The traditional doctor writing on the signage that he does not work on Tuesday prompted the last question. The interview questions were not necessarily decided a priori, as some were generated from observed signage in place.

## **4 From McDonaldisation to Africanisation of social semiotic commodities**

### **4.1 African languages and English as equal commodities**

Various authors cite “McDonaldisation”, often associated with the English language, as a consequence of globalisation and in LL studies. For instance, Gorter (2006: 4) argues that the McDonaldisation of the linguistic landscape is “reflected in the increasing space of the English language”. Orman (2008: 66) adds: “English is allegedly perfectly suited to expressing the values of industrial

pollution, consumerism, global capitalism and imperialism or what some authors refer to as “McDonaldisation”. However, Figures 1 and 2 illustrate a change of dynamics and the transformation of a “McDonaldised” (English only) space into an Africanised (multilingual) space. One way of looking at Figure 2 is that two African languages, Setswana and Afrikaans (essentially Africanised Dutch) have outnumbered English. It could also be concluded that although English, a “Western” language is outnumbered by two African languages, due to English’s top position on the sign, it is valued more than the other two languages. However, the latter would be reading it out of context, as people in the area mainly speak and are literate in Setswana and to a less extent Afrikaans, and have little or no literacy in English (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA] 2011). Since they are unlikely to read the English text, its place in the signage has little or no information value. We develop this argument later.



**Figure 1:** Older monolingual English sign.



**Figure 2:** Latest multilingual sign.

The signage pictured in Figures 1 and 2 are placed a stone-throw from each other at the entrance of Ulco, a small place that produces and sells AfriSam cement. The signs in Figures 1 and 2 share a common goal; that is to communicate where cement sales take place. However, the signs differ when it comes to which languages the producers consider as a commodity and/or valuable. Vandembroucke (2016: 87) states that the singular use of English on signage is not surprising, since “the McDonaldisation of the public domain resulted in English only signs, with or without local impact being common”. Based on the waning state (peeling paint and rustiness) of Figure 1 it can be concluded that it

is the “older” sign. As can be observed, Figure 1 is an English only sign and based on this, it can be concluded that during the period when the sign was erected, English was the only language that enjoyed commodity status. It could also be said that erecting Figure 2 later shows that the producers of the signs at the rural municipality realized that English was not the only commodity candidate for effective communication in the area.

Vandenbroucke (2016: 96) explains that the function and value of English in non-native spaces could serve two purposes. Firstly, “English fulfils a vehicular goal to communicate an ideational, comprehensible message”. Secondly, English on signage serves as “a vehicle of association, invoking profitable qualities and values related to the brand and the commodities on sale in a particular market” (Vandenbroucke 2016: 97). Ulco can be considered a non-native space as only 2.21 percent of the population cite English as a first language (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA] 2011). According to Vandenbroucke’s (2016) argument, the English on the signage in Figure 1 in Ulco can be said to have a dual function: to communicate the location of the factory, which is where the cement sales take place, and to position the factory as a global product, as English is a global language. However, considering that very few people speak, let alone read English in the area, the sign can be said to be misplaced.

There is an observable shift in Figure 2 – a previously English only space is reinvented and reimagined into a multilingual space (Pennycook 2010; Banda and Jimaima 2015). Heller (2003) observes how minority languages in Canada are increasingly being commodified, due to the globalised new economy. The inclusion of Afrikaans and Setswana in the new sign signals the acceptance and re-imagining of these two local languages as commodities. The creation of a multilingual sign and the commodification of local languages have something to do with the company that recently bought Ulco’s mine, namely Afrisam. The “sam” in the company name, AfriSam is an abbreviation for *samente/disamente*, a consequence of Africanising/localising the English ‘cement’ in six of South Africa’s official languages. Assuming that “Afri” is a shortened version of the name of the continent, Africa, AfriSam’s name suggests they produce African cement. The inclusion of these previously “non-commodified” local languages onto signage and into the company’s name not only grants value to local languages, but also validates AfriSam’s claim of being proud of their African heritage, and strengthens AfriSam’s identity as “the largest black-owned and controlled cement producer in South Africa”. AfriSam has branches in other South African provinces and African countries (Swaziland, Tanzania and Lesotho). Therefore, it is essential that it sells its African identity, even through signage, as is evident in Figure 2. In

commodifying local languages, in order to sell their product and reinforce their company identity, AfriSam recognises “language’s status as a readily identifiable index of ethnicity and cultural authenticity which casts it as a selling vehicle par excellence” (Leeman and Modan 2009: 191). Heller (2003: 474) argues that “despite the widespread complaints about the McDonaldisation of the linguistic landscape, many sectors of the globalised new economy are centred on multilingual communication”. We want to argue that in multilingual signage or contexts, oftentimes researchers focus on English, ignoring the role “minority” languages play in the co-construction of meaning. This results in a monomodal deficit, rather than a comprehensive multimodal analysis of signage. Regarding language in signage, we question the assumption that English or any other language placed higher, in vertical placement of information, necessarily means that the language is more highly valued than the others. Thus, we take Figure 2 as representing the appreciation of multilingual modes of communication in the global economy in a local space. This opens up a space for commodification of local languages, which in turn inevitably results in the commodification of multilingualism, and in AfriSam’s case the commodification of an African identity.

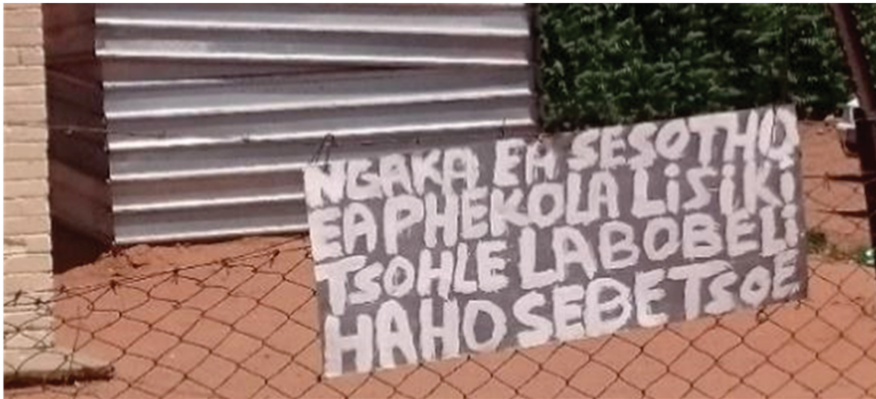
Vandenbroucke (2016: 87) draws on Bourdieu’s notion of linguistic marketplace in her study of commercial signage in Amsterdam and Brussels. A linguistic marketplace is a space in which “different languages and varieties are hierarchically ordered and function within a particular market as commodities with symbolic value attributed to them” (Vandenbroucke 2016: 87). The sign pictured in Figure 2 serves as an example of a linguistic marketplace where three different languages are used to sell a product, i.e. cement. Although it is noticeable that English is positioned higher than Afrikaans and Setswana in Figure 2, the penetration and visibility of these local languages on the linguistic market in LL (compared to their non-existence in Figure 1) shows that the position of English as the alpha of commodified languages is being challenged. In any case, in the situation in the Northern Cape, where for many people literacy is mostly in local languages (Setswana and Afrikaans), the positioning of English at the top is of little or no consequence in terms of language and power relations as the gaze is directed to the familiar linguistic features of Setswana and/or Afrikaans. This means that the “linguistic hierarchies and regimes, ways of seeing” (Kelly-Holmes 2014: 139) as premised on reading ability in English are blurred, if not subverted and collapsed, by local social actors, who in their everyday language practices use Setswana and Afrikaans or blend these languages with English linguistic features. The English is itself often made to take local Bantu morpho-phonological features. Other than Khoisan languages, all indigenous African languages in South Africa belong to the Bantu



language family. As will be shown and argued below, the assumed culturally determined gaze by the producers of the signs in the above figures, placing English at the top, followed by Afrikaans and Setswana, is not in line with local people's ways of configuring languages in the locally produced signage.

## 4.2 Multilingualism and the marketing of authenticity

According to Heller (2003: 474) “language often does play a role in the management of the shifting relations between commodity and authenticity, generally by being deployed as a means to control access to newly valuable resources being developed”. In multilingual contexts, different languages or language blends can play the role. Figure 3 serves as an example of how different languages are simultaneously used as a commodity to sell services, while also being used as a tool to authenticate/qualify the seller.



**Figure 3:** Business sign of a Sotho (traditional) doctor.

The sign pictured in Figure 3 advertises the services of a traditional, Sotho doctor. The sign is written in Sesotho and can be translated into English as: ‘Sotho doctor. Can heal all diseases. Closed on Tuesday’. The doctor simultaneously uses Sesotho to exotify her/his services and validate her/himself as an authentic Sotho doctor in a non-Sesotho speaking place. By only using Sesotho on the sign, the doctor uses the language as a “commodified marker of distinction” (Leeman and Modan 2010: 192). As Sesotho is a “foreign” language in the Northern Cape province, the doctor marks his services, which are now constructed as distinctive from the “common

place” services from the many Tswana traditional doctors in the area. Consequently, Sesotho in this case comes across as exotic, because it is “uncommon” and “mysterious”, due to its rareness in the linguistic landscape.

The mention that the doctor does not work on Tuesdays might appear inconsequential or a poor marketing strategy, since Monday to Friday are the “normal” working days. However, this only helps amplify the construction of the language fetishism of Sesotho (Kelly-Holmes 2000: 71) and hints at the exotic power of the doctor. Kelly-Holmes (2000: 71) explains that language fetishism occurs “when the communicative value of certain words is irrelevant, as they have been mystified or obscured”. By excluding Tuesday as a working day, the doctor further mystifies his services, and the mystery surrounding him.

Noting that Sesotho is one of the eleven official languages in South Africa and is widely spoken in the Free State and Gauteng provinces, and that it is mutually intelligible with Setswana, interviewees related to this sign gave clarity as to why they thought the doctor is from Lesotho. They indicated that the spelling system used in Figure 3 is that of Sesotho from Lesotho, which differs from South African Sesotho. In Figure 3, the spelling of ‘of’ as *ea* identifies the doctor as Sotho, as in South African Sesotho it is written as *ya*, similar to the Setswana spelling in Figure 4. The other reason given for the doctor being from Lesotho relates to the earlier argument on marketisation of quality of services, which is the belief that Sotho traditional doctors from Lesotho, as “expatriates”, provide better quality services than local doctors. Here are two quotes from the interviews:

- (1) a. “They have very powerful traditional medicine in Lesotho, compared to South African medicine.”
- b. “The doctor knows that people in the area believe that doctors from Lesotho are very good, so the message helps the doctor advertise his services.”

As to why the doctor does not work on Tuesday, one interviewee volunteered the following explanation, which, in a way, contrasts Western and traditional African ways of preparation of medicine.

- (2) “Traditional medicine is not produced in a factory by machines like Western medicine, or by other people. The doctor himself goes out into the bush to look for roots and plants, grinds, sorts them by hand, and prepares them for clients. He needs a day to do that. So, I believe that’s why he does not work on Tuesday.”



This in a way also illustrates two contrasting modes of production: the traditional one in which the doctor provides the labour and is also involved in the production of medicine, and the Western way in which the doctor is mostly involved in the diagnosis and dispensation of medicine produced and prepared by someone else. Whereas in Figure 3, Sesotho was prominent, in Figure 4 it is mainly Setswana and (to a lesser extent English) which holds commodity candidacy status.



Figure 4: Business sign of a Tswana (traditional) doctor.

The sign in Figure 4 advertises the services of a traditional doctor, Dr Mama Kim. It is written in Setswana [*Ngaka ya Setso*, meaning ‘traditional doctor’] and English (Doctor abbreviated as Dr.). The sign using both Setswana and English, even though the latter language only contributes the abbreviated title “Dr.” can be said to draw on multilingual practices. Dr Mama Kim increases her potential client reach – those who are unable to read Setswana can rely on the abbreviation “Dr.”, as it is the English translation of *ngaka* in Setswana.

Although English and Setswana are both commodified on the sign in Figure 4, Setswana, in this instance, can be said to rank higher on the commodification “ladder” than English. Without the Setswana inscription, *Ngaka ya Setso*, the English inscription would appear suspect; because, typically, commercial signage by Western medical doctors includes their name and surname, their qualification(s), the institution(s) where the qualifications were obtained and the surgery’s operating hours. The inclusion of the Setswana inscription not only explains the type of doctor Mama Kim is; it also explains the inclusion of Mama Kim’s cell phone number. Ordinarily, traditional doctors do not operate from a business building. They do house calls, particularly if a client prefers to keep their consultation private, and are therefore not always in one place. The provision of the cell phone number suggests that the traditional doctor’s consultation terms are flexible – a feature that is not always applicable to the surgery rooms of Western medicine. Dr Mama has creatively defamiliarised aspects of a traditional African doctor and those of a Western educated doctor to construct a unique space for medical practice for her

business. Thus, using “Dr.” and “*ngaka*” in the same discourse helps the traditional doctor not merely straddle both local and global worlds at the same time in the localised space of Northern Cape, but also to market her services as transcending traditional (local) and Western medicinal (global) knowledge systems. By using both “Dr.” and “*ngaka*”, it is arguable that Mama Kim is better qualified than both the traditional and Western doctors respectively, as she presents herself as specialised in both types of medicine and healing practices.

It is also noteworthy that by using the word “Mama” the traditional doctor commodifies attributes that are typically associated with mothers, i. e. nurturing, caring and warm, to advertise herself. The commodification of the motherly nature is also used by a health care company, Johnson & Johnson who recently launched a brand called “Doktor Mom”. According to the Johnson & Johnson website, “generations of mothers from around the world have believed in the healing powers of herbs. DOKTOR MOM® understands mother’s wisdom and has especially developed a herbal cough range ...”<sup>1</sup>

The sentiments expressed by the Johnson & Johnson brand managers echo Dr Mama Kim brand. Dr Mama Kim also appropriates the healing knowledge and power associated with mothers to promote her services. In short, by blending Setswana and English linguistic features, the doctor manages to commodify both as blended cultural and symbolic semiotic material thus blurring the supposed linguistic hierarchy between them.

### 4.3 Local languaging practice in LL

It is apparent from the foregoing that the use of blended linguistic features from different languages into one unit is a purposive choice and a norm rather than an exception. In this section we illustrate the kinds and extent of the transformation of the indigenous African languages, Afrikaans and English linguistic features in the process of commodification. The linguistic features are commodified in the LL of the Northern Cape through what can be described as local languaging practices (Juffermans 2015). The resulting (hybridised) form includes localised English features. Jørgensen (2008: 169) refers to languaging as how “language users employ whatever linguistic features at their disposal with the intention of achieving their communicative aims”. Based on his ethnographic work in The Gambia, in West Africa, Juffermans (2015: 13) suggests the concept of local languaging as a means to “capture the dynamic, performative and

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1 <https://www.jnjconsumer.co.za/our-brands/doktor-mom>

agentive use of language in situated local contexts”. He argues that “local languaging emphasises the local specificity of language and literacy in practice”. The language practices in Figure 5 are an illustration of languaging particular to the location in which the sign is placed.



Figure 5: Advertising *exzors* and *tyres* services.

Figure 5 is also an example of the commodification of local Northern Cape languaging practices. The linguistic practice on the sign is a mixture of linguistic features from three languages: Setswana, Sesotho and English. A direct English translation of the sign would read: *Ke* (I) *lokisa* ‘fix/repair’ *de exzors* ‘exhaust pipes’ *le de tyres* ‘and tyres’. The three languages on the sign represent what Aronin and Singleton (2012) refer to as the Dominant Language Constellation (DLC). The three languages are the official languages of government and business in the Northern Cape. According to Aronin and Singleton (2012: 59) “a DLC constitutes a complex of languages shared on a day-to-day basis by an entire community for which and within which it meets, as a set, the essential functions of communication, interaction and identity marking”. The sign producer uses linguistic features from the Northern Cape’s DLC and blends them into one “language” or communicative unit for commodification and to stylise the advertiser as authentic and local.

Beyond commodifying the Northern Cape’s DLC, through the use of the personal noun, I (*ke*), the sign producer personalises her/his idiolect. Otheguy, García and Reid (2015: 289) state that “an idiolect is language viewed from the

internal perspective of the individual, language seen separately from the external perspective of the society that categorizes and classifies named national languages". The sign producer uses the language not only to advertise his/her services, but to communicate his/her idiolect to her/his audience – an audience whose idiolects share and overlap with the sign producer's.

The spelling of *exzors* provides an opportune example to heed Juffermans' suggestion about focusing on how languaging is localised. The word is spelled the way locals pronounce the word 'exhaust' [ekzo: s] – a shortcut for the entire term which is 'exhaust pipe'. Therefore, the spelling of 'exhaust' as *exzors* serves as an example of the use of spelling that acknowledges local pronunciation (Higgins 2009). Considering that the words are written the way social agents hear or pronounce them, we suggest that the spelling of 'exhaust' as *exzors* is an example of "ear dialect". This is conceptualised as written form whose orthography is dependent on what you hear or how local people pronounce the words/sounds, rather than a predetermined grammar or writing orthodoxy. To further develop the argument about how local people commodify indigenous languages (and localised English) forms in the LL as modes, we draw on Pennycook (2010), who emphasises the centrality of locality/place in the production of language. He puts forth that language "emerges from the activities it performs", and also that it is "a material part of social and cultural life", rather than an abstraction from a system or countable entity (Pennycook 2010: 3). Figure 6 exemplifies the emergency of language from an advertising spatial activity. The resulting language or languaging practice not only defines the space and place, it also defines itself as part of the action, by creating the contexts for use and interpretation of the socially located activity of hair dressing in the rural community.

In concert with Pennycook (2010), in her ethnographic study of East Africa, Higgins (2009: 131) comments on how the spelling on a Tanzanian shop owner's business sign "acknowledges localised pronunciation". Figure 6 has examples that illustrate the acknowledgement of local pronunciation in written advertisements. Examples include the spelling of "pris" instead of "price" and "shoft" as a replacement for "soft". Since the spelling variation is based on local norms of pronunciation, that is, local language practice, we see this as a creative and normal way of spelling in place, rather than as non-standard spelling. The local language practice is that words are written the way they are pronounced by local people.

The second example that illustrates the commodified linguistic features as modes in the local language practices is seen in the word "vasbraid" in Figure 6. It is a combination of two provincial languages in the Northern Cape, Afrikaans (*vas*) and English ('braid'). "Vasbraid" is an example of a speaker drawing on her/his entire linguistic/semiotic repertoire (irrespective of designated languages [cf. Otheguy et al. 2015]) to describe a braid hairstyle. The use of the localised



Figure 6: Signage and price list of Themba Lethu Hair Salon.

hybrid word “vasbraid” which, in English, is referred to as “cornrows” is an example of how localised Northern Cape trending language is incorporated into business advertisements.

Similarly, the price list in Figure 6 contains examples of how the local and global terminology are used collaboratively for commodification and to create a uniquely local sounding product. In this regard, English is localised, reworked and blended with other localised terms for local consumption. Close to the bottom of the price list, there is an amalgamation/hybridisation and localization of the names of different haircuts. The single name “Brushchiscoop” is a localised creation and amalgamation of the English, “Brush cut” and South African English word for a bald head, *chiskop*. *Kop* is from Afrikaans/Dutch meaning ‘head’. “Shaving-Trim” is a combination and localisation of “shaving” (cutting the hair off a part of the body with a razor)<sup>2</sup> and “trim” (making something neat or of the required size or form by cutting away irregular or unwanted parts).<sup>3</sup> Brush cuts differ with respect to the level of “brush able” hair clients would prefer. One such preference is a brush cut that resembles a bald head, known in South Africa as *chiskop*. The term “Brushchiscoop” is a local production of a global product (brush cut) through the addition of a local cut, *chiskop*. As an example of commodified language, the haircut’s name incorporates the local-global aspirations; that is, the name showcases how local-global haircuts are offered at a local level. Trimming hair is a

2 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/shave>

3 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/trim>



common request in salons, while the shaving of beard is ordinarily considered a self-administrated task performed privately, as facial hair is cut more frequently. Therefore, advertising shaving and trimming as one product destabilises notions associated with the divide between “public” and “private” space and commodifies the salon as a jack of all trades.

Pennycook (2009: 2–3) argues that “language operates as an integrated social and spatial activity – a multifaceted interplay between humans and their physical environment”. There is another example that suggests the importance of understanding language as a spatial activity – a product of actual physical space – in Figure 6. The linguistic activity, i. e. the emergence of the names of services, could be said to be a result of spatial limitations. There was not enough vertical space left on the price list to write the names of the four haircuts in full. The problem with this argument is that local people know the services by the listed names and not in their extended forms. Additionally, the merged haircuts cost the same – R15 (fifteen rand) for a Brushchiscoop and R5 (five rand) for ShavingTrim. Therefore, it is justifiable to advertise them as one product, not just as a means to maximise space, but also as a marketing strategy in which, visually, consumers pay for two products for the price of one.

One does find signage written in monolingual English akin to that typified in the Oxford English Dictionary as in Figure 1 above, and in other “top down” official signage as in Figure 7.

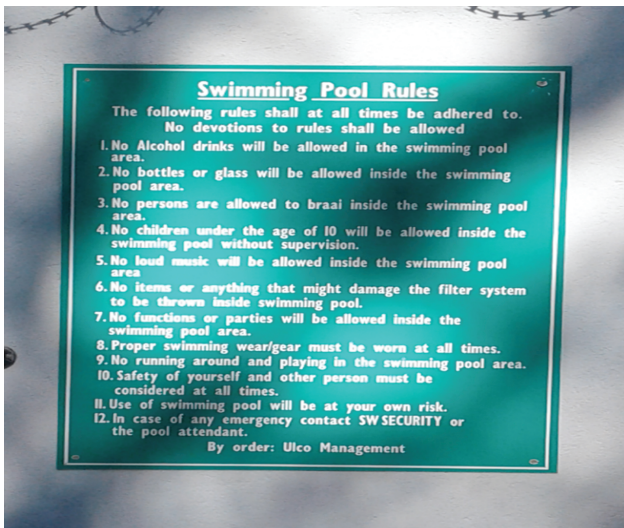


Figure 7: Swimming pool rules.

These “standard” English signage compete for space with the multilingual ones discussed above. The repetition of the phrase “swimming pool area” in almost all the rules reflects the foreignness of this mode, when used on its own in information dissemination in the area. It is apparent that there is a lack of creativity in language use and sign making generally in the English only signage, compared to the translanguaged ones discussed above. The repetition of the phrase “swimming pool area” several times in Figure 7 looks more like an attempt to be understood, than making the sentences involved self-contained. It could also be an attempt to “sound” legal, but legalese in English is difficult to understand, even by ordinary native speakers of the language. The monolingual English signage creates a different and more distant and impersonal relationship with the consumers than the multilingual one.

## 5 Conclusion

In applying commodity candidacy to communities where multilingual languaging practices are the norm, it can be concluded that local languages are as likely to achieve commodity status as English. English has the same localised status as local African languages. Its “global” visibility is obscured through remorpho-phonologisation; that is, it is made to take the form of the local (Bantu) language morpho-phonological system. Hence, local languages and localised English become signs of commodification in linguistic landscapes. They become part of the localised and iconised economies of linguistic landscape in three ways: firstly, the rise of Africanisation and multilingual linguistic dispensation economic practices; secondly, the mystification and exotification of discourses as marketisation tools; and thirdly, the use of local languaging practices to attract local customers. Based on the examples discussed, this article concludes that commodity candidacy and consequently commodification is a dynamic process not cast in stone as implied by previous studies that continue to perceive English as the only language capable of ensuring “economic prosperity” and signalling “modernity” and “upscaling”. As shown in this article, English is essentially transformed into a local language in the process of commodification. Localised English forms are blended with equally “mixed” local languages, thus creating a complex blend of languaging practice. It is this complex blend of languaging practice that helps to upscale the commodity status of the “named” languages constituting discourse. At the same time, in multilingual contexts as exemplified in this article, languages as “named” things flow in and out of “commodity” status,

depending on the product/service being marketed. The inclusion or exclusion of linguistic features is also dependent on the intended communicative and aesthetic effect on the consumer. The binary characterisation inherent in the literature contrasting “commodified” vs “non-commodified” languages does little to recognise the commercial candidacy and value of all languages as constituting “signs” of commodification in linguistic landscapes.

The symbolic value of English as a language of marketisation, like that of indigenous African languages, is not static. It varies from context to context and from place to place, depending on the product or service being sold and the identities of assumed consumers. In addition, in terms of linguistic/semiotic analysis of LL, it is more rewarding to see English as one among other linguistic and non-linguistic resources available to sign makers. Since there is a tendency to localise English and blend its features with those of other languages, English, or its bits and pieces, should not be described a priori to have a higher status than features of the other languages. For a more comprehensive account of LL in multilingual contexts, we propose that languages and/or their features should be valued as modes in socio-cultural contexts of production and consumption. In combination or as blends, they contribute to the construction of meaning in LL. If we assume that the languages and other semiotic material constituting the LL are a reflection of choices for meaning making in the design features of multimodal signage in place, the placement in the vertical or horizontal position of languages or their linguistic features does not necessarily mean that they are more highly valued than other languages and semiotic resources in place. The placement could reflect choices in the design features of the multimodal signage which best suits the purpose of the sign.

Lastly, Kress (2010) talks about the need to develop a social semiotic theory of multimodality that keeps account of contemporary developments in the ever-changing world of media and communication characterised by instability and mobility. Prior and Hengst (2010) describe how people with their engagement with semiotic material routinely rework the different kinds of signs leading to re-designed spaces, reworked talks and remade objects for new meaning and purposes. Along the same lines, we have shown that language is one of the semiotic materials reworked for its meaning potentials in sign making. In multilingual contexts, we have shown the different languages or linguistic features being used to perform different trans-local, local and transnational identities, making sign making and consumption very complex and productive. The reworking of semiotic material leads to the blurring of boundaries of genres, modalities and of languages and their linguistic features. Therefore, the value of the languages or their linguistic features, as modes, is not in their isolated and “fixed” state, but as mobile semiotic affordances,



which should be interpreted as part of an ensemble of semiotic material, whose meanings unfold as part of the multimodal phenomena in place. Consequently, we conclude that in multilingual contexts commodified languages, as modes or semiotic resources, should be seen as part of the multimodal/multisemiotic resources used for meaning making, whose design features as languages or translanguaged “blends” depend on the goods and services being marketed, and the intended consumers.

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