# Space-Time (Dis)continuities in the Linguistic Landscape

Studies in the Symbolic (Re-)appropriation of Public Space

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# Introduction

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## Expanding LL studies to space–time (dis)continuities

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### 1 Reappropriating public space

The last few years have seen the toppling of statues, the defacing of monuments, mass protests, and calls for the renaming of army barracks, a large-scale semiotic justice movement that started in the United States but gained vigour worldwide. The year 2022 also brought the changing of Russian embassies' addresses in a protest against the Russian aggression on Ukraine, resulting in the road outside the Russian embassy in Vilnius, Lithuania, being renamed to *Ukrainos Didvyrių gatvė*, 'Ukrainian Heroes Street'; in London, it is "Kyiv Road". Global semiotic furore continues to result in problematic sedimented history being contested or even stripped away, while newer voices indexing different, sometimes more inclusive, worldviews are vying for space. Political transformations as well as an energized civil rights movement continue to harness old and new symbolic resources, resulting in demonstrations for the rehabilitation of minoritized communities and contentious power struggles for public narratives that are tied to tribal, ethnic, or religious divisions. From political graffiti and subversive writing, performative acts of symbolic claiming and reinscribing the landscape add another layer of agency to the writing on the wall (see Blackwood and Tufi 2015; Phan 2021, inter alia).

These examples bring to the fore the battle for representation in the LL, revealing the potent symbolism of inscription and commemoration in the public cityscape. More generally, the current debates about memorial hegemony present us with a vivid illustration of the performative power of urban space: the act of symbolic appropriation and reappropriation of this space functions as a potent mechanism to obliterate "the memory [and the legacy] of … [a] former [world view and/or] regime" (Azaryahu 2012: 387), as the material carriers of memory in the semiotic landscape are publicly (re)constructed for the ideological needs of the ever changing present.

The relationship between the linguistic landscape (LL) and the political forces it purports to represent is therefore fundamentally dialectic in that the prevalent ideologies of those in power shape the LL, but the LL

in turn reflects, reifies, and/or contests this collective memory (Tufi 2019; Bendl 2019; Lefebvre 1968). And while the debate about who and what is included in the public space is not new, critical toponymy has seen a renewed focus on the historical forces that brought about the "social order" (Blommaert 2013: 51) in public space.

This volume gives a forum to research that puts the spotlight on the semiotic actions and transformations that have shaped and continue to shape public space at different timescales at a number of different sites across the past century. By examining shorter and longer waves of politically driven (re)semioticizations, the volume provides a differentiated and multifaceted view on the complex temporalities that underpin multimodal discourses in contested public space. The contributions to this collection investigate the ways in which temporal (dis)continuities in textualities and semiotic material in the LL intervene in, influence, or are testament to a variety of political processes, from post-colonial struggles to post-communist transformation, as well as a variety of more recent fights for minority rights and upheavals in the socio-political order. The goal is to apply more and varied methodologies to investigations of the nexus of social/political history and the semiotic landscape, expanding on the time–space connections in processes of (re)naming and spatial contestation practices raised in Puzey and Kostanski (2016) and Ainiala and Östman (2017) but with a special focus on the temporal dimension of social/political change.

## 2   The temporal dimension of the LL studies

Symbolic processes of (re)claiming public space tend to reflect larger societal changes and constitute a highly visual element in challenges to hegemonic narrations. Semiotic actions performed on and within the cityscape bring about a transformation of public space understood in terms of the Habermasian public sphere, where political participation leads to the cyclical (re)formulation of issues of public interest. But while hegemonic and more subversive political forces strive to erase past semiosis and/or inscribe their own world view, the LL continues to harbour traces of times past, which in turn serve as a trigger for larger political debates and political-ideological awakenings (Bendl 2019; Fabiszak and Rubdy 2021).

Obviously, reflections and influences of political action are not only observed in the more stable aspects of the LL such as street names or other officially sanctioned elements of the city-text, but particularly in the "transient LL", such as protest signage and ephemera of social movements (Shiri 2015; Seals 2015). Consequently, the objects of study investigated in this volume vary in their temporal scope. From more permanent signs, including street names, murals, and street art more generally, to the more transient, including demonstration placards, which, however ephemeral, become recorded and stored in the mass media, to semiotic traces left

behind on a variety of edifices and to debates on social media outlets, where they reach a broader, often global audience.

This volume thus contributes a layered viewpoint on the ways in which different realities are emplaced in the living past (as is the focus in Peck, Stroud, and Williams 2018). What is more, the creation of places of belonging throughout phases of political and social turmoil and unrest brings across both the ephemerality of semiotic landscaping and the precarious unease of sometimes-simultaneous worldviews. Indeed the traces – and notable silences – in the palimpsest of the LL are perceived and read through emotionality and "imagined memories" (Huyssen 2003: 16), which, quite apart from textualities, can be achieved via the use of semiotic resources and materialities and the associated affordances they offer, be it a choice of language, script, visual arrangements on placards, murals, and in street art. The attention to social agents visibly articulating their experiential positioning changes public scapes into "place[s] of affect" (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010: 4), linking the contributions in our volume with Wee and Goh's (2020) work (see also Clough and Halley 2007, Wee 2016).

## 3 Time–space continuum

As the studies in this volume aptly illustrate, social and political upheaval happens all the time, in different communities, and over short and longer stretches on the temporal axis. Indeed, far from being a static result of historical forces, public space is a perpetually dynamic organism of sometimes antithetical versions of history, none of which are ideologically neutral (see Tufi 2019, who cites Benjamin's critique of historicism 2004–2006: 391). Conceptualizations of public space as historical layering bring to the fore the fact that LLs do not exist within a singular moment in time. Rather, as ever-changing and temporally bounded snapshots of contested memory and memorialization they contain a wealth of both extemporaneous and planned spatial and temporal discourses (Tufi 2019), connecting to commemorative priorities of the past and the present. The Bakhtinian (1981) concept of *chronotope*, which relates to the inseparability of time and space in human social action, provides us with a useful conceptual tool which allows us to decode the levels of meaning present in the landscape against a broader geographic and temporal backdrop. From the LL we thus move to "memoryscapes" (Harjes 2005: 149), marking the nexus between identity and memory. Consequently, the conceptual focus shifts from contested textual representations to historiography encoded in layered semiotic formations.

We are not first to point out that critical toponymy and LL research has largely tended to overlook space–time (dis)continuities at their peril (Pavlenko and Mullen 2015). To date, the bulk of research has focused on textual choices of a particular regime or at a particular political-ideological

juncture, rarely engaging with the longitudinal historical events which would allow the analysis of signs in the LL within their time–space organization (but see Spalding 2013; Pavlenko 2010; Tufi 2019), consider also the special issue of the journal 'Language in Society' on Semiotic Timescapes edited by Lazar (2022). This collection aims to provide a platform to research on the historical forces and semiotic transformations that have shaped and continue to shape public space in a number of different communities across the past century. To this aim, we have invited key players in LL studies and in critical toponymy to explore the relevance of semiotic processes as precursors, support mechanisms for, and/or reminders of political or social events – as well as those that are subversive of such changes and/or aim to incite revolt and bring about regime change. The case studies represent locations in Europe (Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Germany, Poland, Turkey, Ukraine), Asia (Hong Kong, India, Timor-Leste), Africa (Rwanda, Ghana), North (United States) and South America (Venezuela). The chapters in this volume can be grouped according to the temporal dimension into three clusters: those that tackle changes in the LL in post-colonial societies explore the reverberations of historical upheaval that covers the longest historical time depth. These contributions focus on the lingering effects of colonial regimes in the LL, or of more recent effects of reterritorialization. In the middle section of the time axis are those chapters that explore semiotic transformations in post-communist societies. These chapters shine the spotlight on the linguistic negotiations in the former Soviet sphere of influence, re-examining the, sometimes-lengthy, processes underlying the reclaiming of semiotic landscapes by democratic governments and societies. The third group, finally, explores even more recent events, including expressions of political dissent, reactions to gender-based violence, social unrest, protests, political revolts, and revolutions which have characterized the past few years.

## 4  Grouping of chapters by time-depth

### 4.1  Post-colonial transitions in the LL

Alderman's chapter traces the political origins of the use of *plantation* as a toponym within the context of racialized injustice(s), especially in the American South. His critical audit shows that the term not only represents a modern White supremacist fetishization of a grossly reimagined past, but that it also echoes the still-ongoing commodification of Black labour and the symbolic violence inherent to the afterlife of slavery. Huang investigates the spatial patterns of street names commemorating the British royal family and officials in Hong Kong. The chapter elucidates the complex dynamics of reappropriating the colonial heritage by present-day Hong Kongers in an attempt to construct an identity distinct from that of Mainland China.

Rosendal's contribution relies on nexus analysis to explore the ways in which language policy changes in post-genocide Rwanda are understood and embodied in public signage. A shift in political allegiance towards the promotion of English finds expression in shop signs which reproduce and materialize the new Rwandan national identity. The official narrative underlying this political reorientation is mirrored in interviews with shop owners and passers-by. Ross's chapter captures a short wave of semiotic disruption of during an election campaign period in Timor-Leste, contextualized within a political system still reverberating from two very different and longer waves of colonial disruption. She finds that political hopefuls differed in their method of campaign advertisement according to their target constituency, but that all parties circumvented officially prescribed linguistic norms in covert acknowledgement of disparities between the generations and symbolic solidarity between them. Rubdy shows how the nationalist agenda of Baharatiya Janata Party in India finds its symbolic expression in the erasure of the Muslim past through the renaming of cities. Her discussion of the change of *Allahabad* into *Prayagraj*, and *Faizabad* into *Ayodhya* offers an insightful discussion of the sociopolitical context of these space–time discontinuities, resulting in naturalizing heritage as a means of identity politics. Tufi, Blackwood, and Andersen explore two sites used as holding prisons for slaves in Ghana. Reporting from an experiential autoethnographic perspective allows the authors to hone in on the daily (re)constructions of space–time disjunctures, performed by the emptiness of spaces once inhabited by governors, guards, and slaves, and by the embodied narratives provided by the tour guides.

### 4.2 Post-communist transformations of the LL

Borowiak's chapter on the transformative power of street art focuses on a small Bulgarian village, where the Balkan identity of the villagers becomes a starting point for artistic endeavours of a group of artists from Poland. The murals they co-produce become a commentary on local, national, and global politics and in this way transform the village into a hub of social media and mass media interest. Fabiszak et al.'s longitudinal study of two border towns on the German-Polish border demonstrates how the forces of national identity politics, (de)nazification, and (de)communization affect street-naming practices differentially in the two states. The revival of a centuries-old Hanseatic identity for Frankfurt (Oder) contrasts with ideological fatigue in Słubice, where streets are named after fruit and trees, rather than potentially politically problematic historical figures. Gnatiuk and Melnychuk analyze the streetscapes of Kyiv, Vinnytsia, and Poltava in Ukraine, framing them as cases of failed decommunization. While the law requires city administrations to remove street names commemorating communists, building administrators, and private enterprises tend to use

the old street name plaques, or use both the old and new names on their information boards. Kosatica's contribution examines the emergence of eerie murals depicting a war criminal throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina and in virtual space. Taking a multimodal social semiotic approach, the author argues for the political importance of exploring postwar semiosis, since the perpetual existence of such murals serves as a dangerous political statement which exposes the deep-seated instability of the country.

### 4.3  Current contestations in and of the LL

Hanauer's documentation of waves of change within the linguistic landscape at the site of an antisemitic attack in Pittsburgh, United States, shows how the LL is a reflection of spontaneous community support as well as planned community narrative. He combines a traditional LL method, document analysis, and poetic autoethnography to highlight the discursive evolution of the site from reactionary community-building to victim-oriented remembrance. Sawall explores the transient public textuality of the 2019 Cologne Pride Parade, an event which aims to increase the visibility of queer people in public spaces. The analysis brings to the fore problematic omissions and normativities in the depiction of queer communities, highlighting patterns of political (non)representation and marginalization both in the official reporting of the event but also within the queer community itself. Velásquez Urribarrí analyzes the use of a mobile alphabet during protests in Venezuela in 2017. Her analysis traces the fluid grouping and regrouping of people, signs, and artefacts in LLs of protests, arguing that the concept of assemblages allows us to understand the shifting arrangements and dynamics that characterize LLs of protest. Wasilewski focuses on the transient landscape of the 2020/21 Women's Protests in Poland that opposed the tightening of the abortion ban. Juxtaposing the forms and content of modern banners with those used in the 1980s reveals a number of time-bound differences, including the increasing reliance on intertextuality, humour, and expression of emotions, whereas communist protests were more focused on identifying groups of demonstrators. Yoltay traces toponymic (re)naming of public spaces in Ankara and İstanbul since a failed coup attempt in 2016. Her GIS-based analysis maps politically motivated re-contextualization aimed at commemorating the trauma of the coup and constructing a new tale of national heroism. The analysis demonstrates the insidious ways in which interventionist codification of spaces inscribes power into public memory, naturalizing and legitimizing regime change in Turkey.

What unites these different chapters are the complex ways in which public semiotic choices preserve or challenge the power structure as they play out across time and space in the last century (see also Malinowski and Tufi 2020). More specifically, we have asked the authors to reflect on the

complex relationship between the semiotic landscape and the diachronicity of political changes such that semiotic choices are not only seen in their dual function as harbingers or reverberations of upheavals across time but also as constitutive elements of such changes. The connection with memory studies (Blackwood and Macalister 2019; Shohamy and Ben-Rafael 2016) brings about more in-depth historical analysis of the LL, bearing in particular on the affective affordances of public textuality (Wee 2016; Wee and Goh 2020).

Together, these papers provide a kaleidoscopic view of the processes of inscription, contestation, persistence, and erasure of public messages across shorter and longer historical waves. By bringing together cutting-edge explorations of the constitutive role such signs in space play in prompting and reflecting on political change, this collection addresses Pavlenko and Mullen's (2015) criticism that LL studies have been neglecting the time–space boundedness of the city-text (Scollon and Scollon 2003; Assmann 2016; Molden 2015; Tufi 2019 inter alia).

Methodologies used in our volume encompass traditional quantitative LL studies and critical toponymy, but also nexus analysis, approaches that focus on the politics of identity and social justice during geopolitical upheavals and their aftermath(s), as well as more experiential accounts. Sources of data, too, exhibit the flexibility of scholarship on the topics, from traditional participant observation resulting in photographs and field notes (Borowiak, Gnatiuk and Melnychuk, Hanauer, Ross), to the more modern; systematic scouring of social media images (Kostica, Sawall, Wasilewski, Velásquez Urribarrí), online news reports and video transcripts (Alderman, Ross, Rubdy), archival materials (Fabiszak et al., Huang, Wasilewski, Yoltay), multimodal signs (Sawall, Borowiak, Velásquez Urribarrí), business registry databases (Alderman), interviews (Borowiak, Rosendal, Fabiszak et al.) and observing the everyday communicative practices of ordinary people (Rosendal) as well as experiential self-reflexive genres (poetry and narratives) as a personally involved experiencer (Hanauer, Tufi et al.). The authors presented in this volume record signs situated in complex political, social, and medial contexts and in meta-contextual LLs created by physical spaces constructed by (or aiming to impose) collective memory (Alderman, Fabiszak et al., Hanauer, Yoltay), signal critical junctures (Borowiak, Huang, Kosatica), voids and erasures (Gnatiuk and Melnychuk, Ross, Sawall), as well as temporary assemblages created at demonstrations (Wasilewski, Velásquez Urribarrí) and the silences left behind by such phenomena as the horrors of slavery (Tufi et al.). Like the studies in Sherris and Adami (2019), our volume employs a variety of sign modalities to explore patterns of semiosis at the local and global level, not only between geopolitical contexts but also between generational and historical access to these modalities.

Overall, thus, the studies featured in this volume shed light on shorter and longer stretches on the temporal axis, filling a gap in the research agenda and – as a whole – providing a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the LL can be implicated in political struggles of different time depths. The focal interest of this collection is on the contribution of the LL not only as the locus of contestations of political and ideological conflicts as well as ruptures in worldview, but also a catalyst and a layered historical record for those conflicts. In this way, this volume is a follow up to Rubdy and Ben Said (2015) and Blackwood et al. (2016) on the LL as the site of contestation of identity. As such, it further expands many of the issues raised in Blackwood and Macalister (2019), including the ways that social order and social memory are encoded, enforced, manipulated, and/or proliferated.

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