Figuration in city as text

Małgorzata Fabiszak

Anna Weronika Brzezińska

Patryk Dobkiewicz

This presentation integrates Linguistic Landscape and cognitive linguistic approaches to multimodal meaning construction. Linguistic Landscape research views city as text (Rose-Redwood et al 2018, Šakaja – Stanić 2018). On this account, street names in their interaction with the urban space create meanings encoding memory and values of the dominant group.

Street naming practices have both spatial and temporal dimensions. The spatial dimension can be observed in the association of importance with city centre and the main thoroughfares leading towards other big cities. The temporal dimension, on the other hand, is at work when "ruptures in political history" (Azaryahu 1997: 481) lead to large scale changes in street names, when old heroes and values are wiped out and new ones are inscribed in the city semiosphere. In cases of massive re-namings, there is often a breach in the cultural transmission of collective memory. Such renaming processes are viewed by the older generations as forms of repressive erasure (Connerton 2007) or recovering repressed memories (Assmann 2010), while for the younger generations their cityscape seems timeless and natural (cf. Fairclough 2003).

When we commemorate a person, it is not just a particular individual and their life events that are commemorated, but rather values that the instigators of commemoration ascribe to. Personal names are often used as metonymies for values (Brdar – Brdar-Szabo 2007, Pang 2010). When street names are used for such commemorative purposes, they inscribe the dominant ideologies in the cityscape in order to further legitimize the government in power (Fairclough 2003). The choice of the streets for such commemoration practices is dictated by their spatial features: length and centrality, which are metaphorically understood as important, as well as the name they carried earlier, which is metonymically understood as standing for the values of the past regime.

Typically, Linguistic Landscape studies theorize these processes in terms of social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 2006; Scollon and Scollon-Wong 2003), which focuses on the physical representation and neglects the figurative mental processes necessary for the meaning creation by the city inhabitants (for a similar critique of social semiotic approach to multimodality see Perez-Sobrino 2017). Cognitive linguistics complements the semiotic approach by focusing on cognitive processes motivating the meaning making stimulated by the city text.

In this talk I will present an analysis of the waves of renamings in two locations in Poland: Zbąszyń and Poznań over the last 100 years. The choice of locations will allow me to explore the similarities and differences in the symbolic resemiotization of streetscapes in a small town (Zbąszyń) and a regional capital (Poznań). The timespan has been selected, as it witnessed the emergence of the Polish state after the Great War (1920-1939), the Nazi occupation (1939-1945), the communist rule (1945-1989) and the post-transformation democracy (after 1989). These changes in the political regimes have also been reflected in the naming practices. The observed patterns of sedimentation and change will be considered as reflecting the figuration of ideological values in the city as text.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, city as text, metonymic chains, metaphor, collective memory.

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