

The Diachronicity of Minneapolis's Heritage Linguistic Landscape

The Cedar-Riverside neighborhood has always been a diverse area of Minneapolis. In the late nineteenth century, European immigrants were the most numerous residents, among them Scandinavians, Central Europeans, and Eastern Europeans. Historical placenames such as Danish Flats, Little Lithuania, and Snoose (*snus*) Boulevard attest to their presence. Additionally, archival photographs show multilingual signage in the early twentieth century. By the 1960s and 1970s, Cedar-Riverside was known as the Haight-Ashbury of the Midwest as a haven for intellectuals, radicals, activists, and artists. It attracted immigrants from China and refugees from Vietnam. Today, it is still home to Minneapolis's oldest Chinese bakery. The most recent immigrants to Cedar-Riverside are refugees from Somalia as a result of the Somali Civil War. Good job prospects, lower cost of living, and a higher minimum wage drew many Somali refugees to Minnesota (Yusuf 2012). Estimates of Somalis in Minnesota vary—conservative estimates are around 36,000, though the community itself believes there are approximately 70,000 Somalis in Minnesota (Yusuf 2012), making this area the largest concentration of Somalis outside of Somalia.

The *linguistic landscape* is the: “symbolic construction of the public space” (Ben-Rafael 2008: 41). In understanding the linguistic landscape as symbolic it is therefore “not arbitrary and random” (Bogatto & Hélot 2010: 275). Space is socially negotiated and signs provide an element of control over a space, making them “powerful” (Blommaert 2013: 39). Thus, the ensigned public space shows us more than just information on the demographic nature of a society. In viewing signs as indications of power in society, linguistic landscapes can uncover the historical and political aspects of the space (Pavlenko & Mullen 2015). The legitimacy afforded certain languages in a space and the type of signs on which they appear, especially in multilingual spaces of refuge and immigration, inform us about the power of one language over another and one speech community over another.

This presentation presents data from a multiyear critical ethnography within the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. It leans on the theoretical framework of *geosemiotics*, “the study of the social meaning of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world,” developed by Scollon and Scollon (2003). An added component to this theory is the *diachronicity* of signs over time in a place, as suggested by Pavlenko and Muller (2015). Understanding the linguistic landscape from a historical vantage is necessary for understanding how the landscape changes over time and how different speech communities inhabiting the same space are privileged or marginalized over time. Especially for the heritage languages in Cedar-Riverside—which is now marketed as a space of refuge—understanding how the languages have been ensigned over the years is important for understanding the space's contemporary context.

References

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