

Language policy in public space

A historical and contemporary account of the linguistic landscape of Asmara, Eritrea

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My paper is about the linguistic landscape of Asmara, and the ways in which it reflects the historical development of language policies in Eritrea, enacted by the diverse foreign powers that ruled the country and the government of Eritrea after Independence.

I will first discuss the notion of public space as a socially constructed phenomenon and connect it to the concept of a 'guilty landscape' referring to the impact or – literally – the imprint of societal happenings on the physical surroundings where they took place. Such traces of history contribute to changing concrete places into spaces and as such help memorizing and handing over the narratives connected with these spaces.

After briefly introducing the sociolinguistic tradition of ethnographic linguistic landscaping as a way to unravel the traces of language policies that over the years have co-constructed and have given meaning to Asmara's public space, I will analyze a collection of semiotic signs, taken in Asmara between 2001 and 2018, stemming from the periods of Italian, British, Ethiopian and Eritrean rule. I mainly try to show how public signs in Asmara, fossilized as well as contemporary, bear witness of the ways in which language and state ideologies of the respective rulers were symbolically implemented and enshrined in visible language. In addition to Italian, Amharic, Tigrinya and Arabic, attention is also given to English, the international language that was introduced during the British Protectorate period and managed to maintain and, contrary to what one would expect, even strengthen its position in Asmara in recent years in relation to the inhabitants' connection to the internet as a way to virtually escape from the city.

The different historical periods under investigation are finally comparatively discussed and some general conclusions are formulated pertaining to the meaning of Asmara's consecutive linguistic landscapes as socially constructed spaces.