

Constructing multiculturalism and national identity in Penang, Malaysia: A perspective from the 2020 Penang International Container Art Festival

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Abstract

This study focuses on examining how multiculturalism is constructed in public spaces in Penang, Malaysia. In doing so, we argue for the significance of murals in constructing multiculturalism symbolically. Data consist of 10 photos of murals displayed during the 2020 Penang International Container Art Festival in both urban and rural areas in Penang, a state with a long history of multiethnic communities living together. The analysis shows that multiculturalism is portrayed according to specific themes – occupation, living culture, and imagination – which are marshalled to create a sense of identity and belonging. Such sense is deeply imbricated in the making process of Penang’s national identity in which a series of compromises and accommodations is much needed to achieve the vision of multiculturalism. The findings contribute to the current discussion of finding a balance between studies related to urban- and ruralscapes and offer a creative sociolinguistic perspective on understanding multiculturalism.

KEYWORDS: multiculturalism, murals, art installations, urban, rural, linguistic landscape, national identity, Penang, Malaysia

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1 Introduction

Linguistic landscape (LL), broadly defined as languages found on signage in a given environment, is a young and dynamic field that has gained momentum as a systematic approach to studying and understanding sociolinguistic practices and realities in public spaces. In the early days, scholars such as Backhaus (2007) employed a quantitative approach to analyse the distribution of languages written on public signs, produced by professionals and amateurs. Backhaus' analysis led to the understanding of how official and unofficial language policies are implemented in a multilingual setting. Consequently, scholars such as Lanza and Woldemariam (2009) examined language display in a politically contested area and argued that tension was high, resulting in the dispute of language choices and language hierarchies. As LL studies can raise awareness about how regulations impact language display in public spaces, Marten, Van Mensel, and Gorter (2012: 8) conclude that LL is a tool for the 'spread, vitality, maintenance, identity or status of a language'.

In recent years, scholars began examining various discourses in public spaces (Shohamy and Waksman, 2009). For instance, Jaworski's (2015, 2019) analysis of the grapheme and symbol *x* displayed in various typographic, orthographic, and design choices concludes that *x* is part of the global visual verbal register called 'globalese'. In Sydney (Australia), Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) found that smell is closely intertwined with people, language, and places. Both studies demonstrate that if these discourses are excluded in LL studies, noteworthy findings would be missed, and the sociolinguistic environment would be misinterpreted (Spolsky, 2020).

Adding further meaningful insights to the literature, graffiti has been investigated as part of the public spaces (Hanauer, 2004; Kalerante and Mormori, 2006; Radavičiūtė, 2017). Graffiti is defined as a 'ubiquitous feature of the urban landscape commonly perceived to be a symptom of disorder, deprivation, and violence' (Walker and Schuurman, 2015: 608). In Melbourne Australia, graffiti become tourist attractions (Pennycook, 2009, 2010). Despite it being described as the intentional hijacking of a public space, graffiti acts as a form of communication and expression of free speech. Graffiti artists usually hide their identity under mysterious tags so that their identity does not align with the themes and styles of their work. Nevertheless, these artists are sometimes commissioned to draw on buildings or walls as part of a government or non-profit organisation's art project in which their artwork is regarded as "large, often multicolour, and labour-intensive paintings" (Philipps, Zerr, and Herder, 2017: 386), commonly known as murals.