

SASL place-name planning: Developing an app as a non-official intervention

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Abstract

This paper reports on the current state of affairs regarding research and planning pertaining to South African Sign Language (SASL) place names, with reference to the development of a mobile application. The project is conceptualised within the framework of language policy and planning goals.

On official level, some headway has been made with regards to status planning for SASL. It has been assigned as an official language of education in 1996 and its further officialisation has been advanced by the Parliamentary Constitutional Review Committee (CRC 2017). However, most of the language planning interventions have been driven by non-official agencies. They have focussed especially on the educational domain, access to public services and information for the deaf community, as well as corpus planning for and the promotion of SASL. While these interventions achieve essential outcomes, none of them include place-name planning.

Place names fulfil a specialised communicative function. In addition to functioning as artefacts of linguistic and cultural heritage, they facilitate the participation of sociolinguistic communities in shaping the public space. Place names also form a specific lexicographic subset of languages, which is even more interesting in the case of SASL. The deaf do not simply translate spoken place names but instead assign their own through various intriguing processes. Signed place names are generally neglected in place-name planning, even more so in the local context where SASL place names are severely under-documented.

Our mobile app project, as a non-official intervention, serves as a first step to document SASL place names systematically. Its constituent database is comprised of official South African place names, as well as a selection of their SASL equivalents in video format. Using SASL on an accessible, public platform like this might contribute to its legitimisation. This initiative is aligned with the pledges of the Pan South African Language Board's 2020 Charter on SASL (PanSALB n.d.) to "promote and create conditions for the development and use of South African Sign Language". We describe the project in more detail and elaborate on the impact we anticipate it could have on the promotion of SASL.

Keywords: place names; language planning; South African Sign Language

References

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