

Commentary

The words of cities

Words classify territories by dividing, reshaping, describing them. These classifications are never fixed and agreed upon once and for all, because language differs greatly according to the speaker's social, institutional, and situational position. Words take on meaning only when they are actually used in the context of discourses that may carry many different intentions. Sometimes language aims at rationally organizing urban space from above; sometimes words and meanings are adapted to specific situations and interactions. At any moment and place, a variety of language registers are being used in government, science, or the daily life of various urban groups. Many words are thus in competition and all contribute, however unequally, to some 'common' language that is used for describing and understanding cities. Everyday speech records the temporary or more permanent results of those various attempts by various agencies at naming and controlling things in the urban realm. Thus the words of the city do not merely reflect 'objective' reality, they also create it, in a symbolic sense and often in a practical one as well. This is why much can be learnt about cities by studying the words that have named them, their parts, and their 'problems'.

If the working of language in any linguistic area cannot be grasped by listing a single and simple lexicon, the picture gets even more complex and interesting when one considers different languages. There is no point in trying to draw up 'word for word' equivalents between terms describing cities and their elements. 'English for planners', nevertheless, is often supposed today to be the comprehensive common reference for all. That idea of a universal glossary goes along with the belief that, in each linguistic area and among all of them, there exists a common technical or scientific language that reflects some shared sense of what a city is. Though it can be argued that translation is impossible, it is being done daily in a great variety of situations which offer as many opportunities for inquiry.

The words of the city cannot be made to exist by decree, either in a single linguistic area, or in the symphony of nations. Of course, technical and political authorities often attempt to do just that, in particular by coining bureaucratic terms which find their way into the daily lives and speech of people. The words of cities are created and transformed, they travel and take root, they adapt or disappear and are forgotten at varying paces. Words changing over time can be taken as clues to the historical development of the relationship of society to urban space. The words of the city can thus be seen as the scene of classification battles as well as the sedimented and lasting results of these disputes. We must then go back in time both to understand how these battles shaped our present forms of speech and to document the history of cities that has been embedded in language.

"City Words" is an international research programme set up jointly in 1995 by the MOST (Management of Social Transformations) Programme of UNESCO and the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. About a hundred scholars are presently involved in more than twenty countries. They belong to several disciplines, including anthropology, geography, history, the history of architecture and planning, sociolinguistics, and sociology.

In order to promote specific empirical inquiries, the programme is organized in networks in each of the following linguistic areas: Arabic, Chinese, Czech, English,

French, German, Hindi–Urdu, Japanese, Latin-American Portuguese and Spanish, Russian, Spanish, and West-African languages.

At the same time, comparative work is being developed along a series of thematic lines.

1. Town and city: urbanism categorized

Human settlements receive various nouns which enable people both to distinguish what is urban from what is not and to categorize urban settlements. It is the lexicon of the generic and classificatory designations of cities. If this vocabulary was stable for long periods of time, it also went through periods of sudden change: institutional and political upheavals, massive changes of urbanization forms, language reforms. This lexicon varies markedly according to the countries and—even more—according to ‘cultural areas’. Long-range historical work and comparisons between East and West, North and South are therefore particularly important here.

2. City divisions

Words divide cities into various territories in a great many ways. The scale of these divisions varies, ranging from the dwelling unit to the city as a whole. Their mode also varies: sometimes a space is designated by a social or morphological feature; sometimes a territory is precisely demarcated. Administrative divisions and those which result from the inhabitants’ practice do not always coincide, but they rarely completely differ. City divisions can be analyzed as systems of classification that change over long periods of time, which would imply a focus on periods of transition from socially based spatial divisions to merely territorial divisions.

3. Naming new urban areas

Today, just as yesterday, cities have uncertain peripheries. The urbanization of modern times has made them the main place of urban growth and more recently, in some parts of the world, the frontier has become blurred between the city and what is no longer a city. Furthermore, transformations of the urban fabric continuously give birth to new districts or territories which are interpreted with new categories. At various times and in various places, how did urban vocabularies give an identity and a meaning to new spaces—whether planned or spontaneous, rich or poor, legal or illegal—which grow in cities and at their fringe?

4. Languages of urban stigma

There are good and bad areas in cities. Whether small red-light districts or vast popular neighbourhoods, whether located in the old centres or the distant outskirts, bad areas are designated by a vocabulary of open or understated stigma. This terminology applies to different types of buildings, districts, populations, ways of life. It gives form to the opinions coming from outside and above: those, for instance, of superior classes, reform movements, and sanitary or planning legislation. These languages are therefore aspects of the successive definitions of the ‘urban question’. They also compete and combine with the languages of the inhabitants themselves.

5. Sociolinguistic registers and urban language variation

The city takes meaning through denominations and categorizations which result from social processes and are involved in disputes over material, symbolic, and social power. Different registers (popular, journalistic, administrative, legal, planning, etc) confront each other, but are also linked in differentiated oral relationships and uses. Processes ‘coming from above’ and processes ‘coming from below’ interact, in conflicting and complementary relationships between discursive registers and ‘popular’ and state practices.

6. Learned and technical languages

Some social groups have special claims over the knowledge of cities and rational intervention on their development. They speak and act in the name of an expertise defined as a scientific discipline (for example, geography) or a professional know-how (for example, planning). A specialized vocabulary is part of their skill and enables them to describe, explain, and prescribe. Through a comparative approach we can study some of these learned or technical languages, how they have been formed and have evolved in various countries and internationally. We focus here on one specific language register, but we are also aware of the relationships between learned and common languages.

New themes are now being considered for further comparative work, such as: the words of urban public spaces, the words of urban housing types, translation and multi-lingual situations, and reforms of national languages.

“City Words” is open to new partners wishing to deal with the languages previously mentioned and the themes that have been selected as present or future priorities. For further information, please contact:

City Words, Ms Isabelle Pighetti, 45 rue Linné, 75005 Paris, France

Telephone: 33 1 46 34 28 12; fax: 33 1 43 25 24 96; e-mail: ipighetti@compuserve.com

J-C Depaule, C Topalov