

Investigating the geography of street name changes: a spatio-temporal approach

At the most mundane level, street names provide the daily spatial framework for human activities so that cities can function. But beyond their indexical importance as spatial reference landmarks, street names are inevitably loaded with history and ideology, reflecting the present and the past of people, places and nations, particularly revelatory for tracing changes in representational politics. Our wider project takes the perspective of historical sociolinguistics by focusing on the public perception of the changes in street names in three Polish and three German cities as reflected in official documents, city plans and unofficial guides (e.g. from telephone books and tourist maps). Commemorative renaming is seen here as a struggle for representation in the cityscape, a barometer reflecting political changes and a tool for creating social identity within and beyond the city. For Germany, the crucial threshold years resulting in large scale street renaming are 1933, 1947, 1989, while discussions about commemorative semiotic practices continue to take place. In this paper, we report on the spatiotemporal analysis of street name changes for Annaberg-Buchholz (population 22.250) and Leipzig (population 560.500) over the past 100 years.

Recording and representing data from historical sources is hardly ever a routine task, especially when the period investigated transcends two world wars and massive socio-political changes. These events have resulted in accidental or deliberate destruction of official and unofficial documents and artefacts, essential for historical analyses. Nevertheless, we were able to compile evidence from a range of sources, including official lists of street renamings for pivotal years, city maps from the planning departments of the respective towns and cities, street layout diagrams from address and telephone books, tourist guides with town and city layouts and more recently accurate depictions of streets from electronic sources, such as online maps. We followed a thorough data entry and coding approach:

- A geospatial framework (geodatabase) was created consisting with contemporary streets and their respective names as seen today.
- Lists of street names and their changes were entered in spreadsheets using the contemporary name as a unique identifier.
- Historical maps (both official and unofficial) were scanned and used as background for identification of unclear street name changes.

Once the geodatabase was complete, individual streets were coded to reflect ideological and non-ideological motivations and intensity of renamings for further visualisations. The mapping of such data reveals both the extent and the spatio-temporal clustering of historical street name changes in the fabric of towns and cities. We also demonstrate how such visualisations can be developed in interactive mode for the dissemination of project results and outreach activities in consultation with participating citizens.