

Motivations behind South African Sign Language Descriptive Toponyms

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Descriptive signed toponyms are geographical name signs which are central to Deaf naming traditions. They symbolise unique physical geographical, historical, or cultural characteristics that define the lived experiences of Deaf communities. At the of the toponyms is the reflection of etymological significance and linguistic features of Sign Languages and Deaf culture. Signed toponyms form a kind of parallel toponymy imbued in Deaf-specific cultural practices and linguistic patterns. They hold potential for rich and interesting data, yet studies in the area remain scarce. Framed within sociocultural models, this study explores the motivation behind descriptive South African Sign Language (SASL) toponyms. It utilised video data of signed toponyms from a broader project on the survey of SASL toponyms of provinces and major cities of South Africa. The study also utilised explorative qualitative strategies to elicit etymological data of the signed toponyms. The results show a limited number of descriptive SASL toponyms. Many of them are arbitrary and therefore influenced by oral language naming traditions. The results confirm that the toponyms are mainly motivated by physical features of the toponym, cultural expressions and historic memoirs attached to specific geographic referents. Future studies are therefore expected to focus on the preservation of SASL and Deaf cultural naming traditions, expansion of SASL toponymic corpus and machine learning of SASL data.

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