



07 dec  
2023

13h30 - 15h00  
Géopolis 3899

## Language and urban knowledge

A dialogue between Yimin Zhao and  
researchers in Lausanne

writing majority urbanisms together:  
languages, translations and urban studies

**Yimin Zhao**

*University of Zürich & Renmin University of China*

In this talk, I will first revisit previous reflections on the “translational turn” and the *Jiehebu* case in Beijing, and summarise why and how our attention to the vernacular names of urban spatialities are with theoretical and epistemological significance. I will then make dialogues with some recent interventions that question the adequacy of vernacular terms in depicting the unsettled natures, characteristics and spatialities of urban change while also suggest us to shift the focus to alternative terms, such as the “surrounds” and “suspension.” Concurring with the underlying concern of these “ambiguous markers” in foregrounding the urban life yet to be recognised or conceptualised, I want to defend the meaning of vernacular terms in writing our “majority urbanisms” together. On the one hand, these markers we read in the “mainstream” urban studies literature are more often than not *written in English* and work with under- or un-examined abstractions inflected by a logic of labelling. On the other hand, the subjects of seeing and speaking are left unchallenged, as it is still those who can travel, observe, write and publish that are speaking *on behalf of* the observed. To overcome these challenges, I propose that we should rethink exteriority and otherness and “shape individual and collective dispositions to acknowledge the claims of others” (Barnett 2005: 5). This is a pre-condition of the “translational turn,” and it also paves the way for enabling alternative visibilities from/of the overlooked urban conditions. In other words, language embodied in vernacular terms should be foregrounded in decolonial endeavours as a key aspect of thinking subjectivity – and being.

Language and the decolonisation of  
urban studies and planning

**Martin Müller, Laura Neville, Quentin Rihoux**

*University of Lausanne*

While decolonial approaches have gained significant popularity in urban studies and planning research over the past decade, multiple mechanisms of exclusion from academic knowledge production remain. In this contribution, we investigate to what extent the dominance of English as the contemporary lingua franca creates a geography of marginalisation with regard to the dominant channels of academic canon constitution in urban studies and planning: academic journals. Our quantitative analysis of the affiliations of editors, boards and authors of some 20 leading journals reveals an overrepresentation of Anglophone scholars from the Global North despite emerging trends and aspirations towards decolonisation and cosmopolitanisation. It shows a generally poor representation of scholars from the Global South and an even poorer one of scholars from the non-Anglophone South. As such, language-based and colonial hierarchies intersect with each other, and with gender and racial discriminations, thus instituting a ‘spectrum of exclusion’ in knowledge production. Based on these results we discuss the specific implications of what we call ‘epistemic delusion’ for the field. We conclude that equalising the access to academic publishing is inevitable to go beyond the status quo of ‘decolonisation without decolonising’. It will require deeper engagement with language, and consideration not just of what we write but how we write.

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