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Sexing diversity: Linguistic landscapes of homonationalism

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ABSTRACT

Our goal in this article is to illustrate some of the semiotic complexity of pinkwashing and homonationalism in the Israeli context, a complexity that we argue is inadequately modelled by a perspective that focuses solely on the "agentive" or "intentional" actions of the state. Instead, we draw on a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to demonstrate how a series of seemingly mundane practices involving an intricate web of state, para-state and non-state actors contribute to pinkwashing, and hence to the reproduction of Israeli homonationalism.

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1. Introduction

The notion of "diversity" has recently received renewed attention partly as a result of an increased interest on the part of some sociologists in understanding and theorising what are perceived as 'new' forms of sociological complexity. In particular, Vertovec's (2007) concept of "superdiversity" has been influential in opening up research agendas, networks and discussions among scholars interested in the relationship between language and society (see in particular Blommaert and Rampton, 2011; Androutsopoulos and Juffermans, 2014; Deumert, 2014 for a poignant critique). Arguably, however, diversity – whether or not augmented by a superlative prefix – has to a certain extent always been at the centre of two different but interrelated spheres of language and communication, namely multilingualism research and language policy practices. While scholarship on multilingualism is generally underpinned by a belief that linguistic diversity is an asset to be celebrated or a condition to strive for (see in particular Baker, 2011), nation-state apparatuses have historically thought otherwise. As Blommaert (2015: 82) cogently puts it,

> Languages were distributed within and separated by national boundaries, and the national boundaries, in turn, also defined the criteria of belonging and membership of the national community, creating 'migration' and, later, 'trans-national', and 'global' flows as deviant patterns hard to fit within the monocentric nation-state imagination. 'Diversity' stood, and stands, for that which violates the rules of a spatially imagined political, historical, social, cultural and linguistic monocentricity.

This has been and is still true of several forms of ethnolinguistic nationalism, stemming from nineteenth century, Western, romantic ideas about one language, one people, one country. However, as Heller and Duchêne (2007) have noted, changing

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patterns in global connectivities have had diverse effects on the ways in which nationalism transforms itself in order to retain its hegemonic status as the unquestionable ideology of (late-) modern political organisation. Indeed some socio-political entities, like Belgium or the UK, amongst others, are tightening the monocentric noose of the national language/culture link (see Pulinx and van Avermaet, 2015; Blackledge, 2005). In contrast, others appear to be "embracing diversity for the sake of unity" (del Valle, 2007: 242). Switzerland, for example, is capitalising – quite literally – on linguistic diversity as the distinguishing trademark of its national identity (see Del Percio, 2013; Duchêne and Del Percio, 2013).

How diversity can be incorporated into nationalist discourse for a nation-state's economic gain is also in the focus of this article. While existing sociolinguistic and discourse analytical research tends to foreground the commodification of language and ethnicity (see in particular Heller, 2003 and the contributions to Duchêne and Heller, 2012), our focus here is on sexual and gender diversity in relation to the processes of marketing Israel as a progressive nation-state. Commonly known as *pinkwashing*, this sort of nation-branding strategy is a manifestation of *homonationalism*, 'a historical convergence of state practices, transnational circuits of queer commodity culture and human rights paradigms, and broader global phenomena such as the increasing entrenchment of Islamophobia' (Puar, 2013: 337) that serves to position the equitable treatment of lesbians and gays as the icon of "civilisation" and "progress" and to portray societies that do not meet this standard as "barbaric", "uncivilised" and "unworthy" (see also Puar, 2011). In other words, homonationalism is the discursive process through which both state and non-state actors bring sexual diversity into the very definition of the nation-state so as to legitimise the exclusion and/or repression of others who are portrayed as lacking in this crucial criterion of "tolerance of sexual diversity". Pinkwashing[1] is the public face of this homonationalist discourse, the way through which Israel can present itself to the rest of the world as a beacon of sexual liberalism in the Middle East, and concomitantly "wash away" neo-colonial policies toward Palestinians (see in particular Puar, 2007, 2013; Schulman, 2012). But pinkwashing is not simply a form of "soft power" through which Israel highlights itself as democratic for the international diplomatic community. Pinkwashing is also underpinned by a strong capitalist imperative, in that the marketing of a sexually and gender progressive Israel also aims to attract a large number of "pink" consumers from around the world. The most successful manifestation of this twofold nationalist/consumerist enterprise is Tel Aviv Pride, which, according to the Israeli media, attracted over 20,000 foreign tourists for its twentieth anniversary in 2013. Obviously, the main audience of pinkwashing is the international community of gay and lesbian tourists, who are to be convinced to visit Israel not only for its beaches, sun, and attractive citizens but also for its track record in support of gay and lesbian rights. Pinkwashing, and the state support of gay and lesbian rights more broadly, has been received with mixed feelings within Israel, with conservative religious groups overtly opposing gay and lesbian enfranchisement, and radical queer and trans collectives questioning some of the agenda underpinning pinkwashing (see also Milani, in press).

In this article, we not only bring into the analytical spotlight initiatives driven by the Israeli state and its official tourism apparatus, but we also cast a critical eye on the circuit of discourses that make up Israeli homonationalism more broadly, paying attention to some of the more mundane (micro) queer complicities (see also Oswin, 2004) that legitimate (macro) state-driven practices. For this purpose, we investigate a sample of textual formations that are part of a larger corpus of data consisting of newspaper articles, photos, webpages, interviews and material artefacts related to the so-called 'Brand Israel Campaign' and to Tel Aviv Pride. We do so through a linguistic landscape approach that is informed by (1) Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) ideas about the rhizome, (de)territorialisation, and reterritorialisation; (2) Billig's (1995) discourse analytical insights into banal nationalism; and (3) Said's (1994 [1978]) theorising of orientalism. On one hand, through discourse analysis, we seek to offer a detailed account of the *discursive tactics* through which homonationalism operates and is legitimated via a variety of apparently banal discursive practices. Thus, we seek to add linguistic precision and empirical substance to an existing body of scholarship that is largely theoretical in nature and has therefore failed to give a detailed description of how homonationalism actually works through discourse (see however Levon and Mendes, 2015; Ritchie, 2015 for notable exceptions). On the other hand, through the lens of a linguistic landscape approach, we seek to bring fresh insights into the ways in which banal homonationalism operates *spatially* in discursive, bodily, and affective practices. In this way, we want to highlight the theoretical relevance of Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) ideas, an important but we believe somewhat neglected framework within sociolinguistics and language and communication more broadly (see however Pietikäinen, 2015 for a notable exception that also spells out the potential limitations of a rhizomatic approach). Before delving into detailed analysis of relevant texts, we begin with some general background on the politics of sexuality in Israel and, in particular, the Brand Israel Campaign, followed by a brief overview of the theoretical apparatus that informs the analysis.

2. Sexuality in Israel: from Zionism to the brand Israel campaign

In the 2009 EastWest Global Nation Brand Perception Index, Israel ranked 192 out of 200 countries surveyed, 'behind North Korea, Cuba and Yemen and just before Sudan' (Schulman, 2011). This, despite the official launch in 2007 of the Brand

[1] The term pinkwashing was originally coined by Breast Cancer Action to capture the activities of "a company or organisation that claims to care about breast cancer by promoting a pink ribbon product, but at the same time produces, manufactures and/or sells products that are linked to the disease." (thinkbeforeyoupink.org). Based on the association between the colour pink and non-normative sexualities, the terms was later re-signified by queer activists and academic with a view to capturing the practices through which states present themselves as gay and lesbian friendly in order to legitimise other discriminatory practices such as legislation that curtails the rights of indigenous, immigrant and religious groups (see e.g. Dreher's (2016) work on Australia).

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