*Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica*, 4, 2 (2012) 341-356

# The Linguistic Landscape of Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda)

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**Abstract.** As a modern research domain, linguistic landscape is the study of writing on display in the public sphere. Linguistic landscape research represents a new approach to multilingualism and is typically focused on urban environments, especially on multilingual settings. In my research paper I am going to focus on signs that we find around us in daily life. Although these signs are abundant they have rarely been taken up for analysis by linguists and other specialists in language, discourse and communication. As the title suggests, the present research focuses on the town Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda), one of the Transylvanian settings characterised by a majority of Hungarian minority population. The Transylvanian region is a historically multilingual region mainly marked by Romanian-Hungarian bilinguals. However, the spread of English as an international language of communication and some new immigration trends offer the town a larger linguistic variety.

**Keywords:** multilingualism, linguistic landscape, public signs, Miercurea Ciuc

## Introduction

When we arrive in a new country or city/town, public signs, ads and billboards are often the first forms of contact we have with the language and the script of the place. If the country is multilingual, each instance of language choice and presentation in the public signage transmits symbolic messages regarding



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legitimacy, centrality and relevance of particular languages and the people they represent.

Language is all around us in a textual form as it is displayed on shop windows, commercial signs, posters, official notices, traffic signs, etc. Most of the time people do not pay much attention to the so-called "linguistic landscape" that surrounds them. However, in recent years an increasing number of researchers have started to take a closer look and study the language texts that are present in the public space.

Studies concerning multilingualism are abundant and issues concerning multilingualism are tackled from many different angles. Apart from research done in the field of language acquisition, psycholinguistics or language policy and planning, sociolinguistics is another research field to approach multilingualism. Interested in the relationship between language and society, sociolinguistics may approach the multilingual phenomenon from the perspective of the linguistic landscape, focusing on written information available on language signs in a specific area.

With the growing interest in the concept of public signage, there have appeared a number of interesting articles and reports of studies but only recently has there been an attempt to define the field, to investigate its methodologies and to develop a theory (Spolsky 2009: 29).

## The concept – linguistic landscape

The concept of linguistic landscape has been used in several different ways. In the literature the concept has frequently been used in a rather general sense for the description and analysis of the language situation in a certain country, or for the presence and use of many languages in a larger geographical area. A meaning that comes closer to the way it is used in the present paper is in reference to signage and place-names.

The study of the linguistic landscape is particularly interesting in bilingual and multilingual contexts. The linguistic landscape can provide information about the sociolinguistic context and the use of the different languages in language signs can be compared to the official policy of the region and to the use of the language as reported in surveys.

Over the past 30 years, a number of researchers have started to deal with the rich discoveries of urban public signs and today the study of public multilingual signage is developing into a sub-field of sociolinguistics and of language policy. The attractiveness of the approach lies in its methodological advantages being easier to gather evidences when compared to data collection in the spoken language (Spolsky 2009: 26).

From the perspective of the sociology-of-language,

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> language facts that landmark the public sphere are to be seen as social facts the variations of which should relate to more general social phenomena. It is under this light that the sociological study of linguistic landscapes is to focus on the articulation of linguistic symbols in the public space, and the forces at work in their molding. (Ben-Rafael 2009: 40)

The relationship between linguistic landscape and sociolinguistic context is said to be bidirectional as the linguistic landscape of a certain area or region mirrors the relative power and status of different languages and in the same time it contributes to the construction of this sociolinguistic context influencing it through its visual images (Cenoz & Gorter 2006: 67-68). In other words, the linguistic landscape of a specific territory can function as a result of the language situation that represents the area similarly to census data or surveys but it is not only the reflection of a specific linguistic context as the languages displayed can certainly influence people's perception on the status of different languages.

The term "linguistic landscape" was first used by Landry and Bourhis (1997) in a paper reporting on the perceptions of Francophone high school students of public signs in Canadian provinces. The interest of the researchers was not in observing actual signs, but rather in the students' perception of the *paysage linguistique*. However, the study of public signage has a longer history. Among the first studies we can mention Masai (1972), who studied Tokyo and noted the presence of English, or Rosenbaum et al. (1977), who focused on signs in a Jerusalem street; they found that tourist stores and private offices used English or Romanised script suggesting tolerance for foreign languages while the government supported Hebrew hegemony.

The most common definition used by most of the scholars in the field is that of Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25):

> The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration. The linguistic landscape of a territory can serve two basic functions: an informational function and a symbolic function.

The definition explains their concern with the use of language in its written form in the public sphere, referring to language that is visible in a specified area. In line with the above definition Spolsky and Cooper (1991) are also convinced that linguistic landscape has two functions – informational and symbolic – communicating the relative power and status of linguistic communities in a given territory. Thus, linguistic landscape constitutes the very scene where society's public life takes place. As such, this scene carries crucial socio-symbolic

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importance as it actually identifies and thus serves as the emblem of societies, communities and regions.

After identifying several handicaps regarding the concept of linguistic landscape, in his study Spolsky (2009) tries to build up a theoretical approach focusing on its systematic aspects and development. He considers public signage to provide a valuable way to study language choice and places it within the theory of language management that takes into account the existence of independent domains. Public linguistic space can be considered a distinct domain according to Spolsky (2009), with its own participants, location and topics/content. Applying a similar model to that used for language policy in general, Spolsky identifies its main participants: the sign-owners, sign-makers and the expected readers. However, the government is an additional significant participant as it attempts to control the contents, form and language of the public signs.

The location is usually inside cities or sometimes outside the city and the notion of the public space plays a key role in defining the concept of linguistic landscape. The notion of public space draws from the earlier concept of public sphere associated with the name of Habermas (1989). This public sphere may be viewed from different angles but when it comes to linguistic landscape analysis, the focus is on its territorial-geographic dimension and thus the term public space is preferred (Ben-Rafael 2009: 40).

Apart from the informative content of the sign, the choice of language reflects a symbolic value of some or all of the participants (Spolsky 2009: 33). To the passers-by linguistic landscape carries emblematic significance for the very fact that it constitutes the decorum of the public space (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). In this sense, linguistic landscape can be referred to as "symbolic construction of the public space" as it is the languages it uses and the symbols it shows that serve as the landmarks of the public space where "things happen in society" (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006).

Spolsky also identifies three conditions as the major part of a theory of language choice in public signage. The first condition is to write a sign in a language you know; this rule explains the spelling errors common in signs written in foreign languages. The second rule captures the communicative goal, "presumed reader's condition", meaning to write a sign in a language which can be read by the people you expect to read it. The third rule accounts for language choice on signs that assert ownership, "symbolic value condition", namely, to write a sign in your own language or in a language with which you wish to be identified (Spolsky 2009: 33). This accounts for the order of languages in multilingual signs.

The choices made by various social actors can be analysed from a variety of theoretical perspectives.

An important variable in previous research into the linguistic landscape is the distinction between official and non-official signs. Official signs, also called top-

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down signs, refer to signs placed by the government or related organisations (e.g. street names, road signs, etc.) while non-official signs, called bottom-up signs, are those placed by autonomous social actors such as commercial enterprises, private organisations or persons (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). Landry and Bourhis (1997: 27) summarise the interaction of official, government-related signs and non-official, private signs within the linguistic landscape as follows:

> In some cases, the language profile of private signs and government signs may be quite similar and thus contribute to a consistent and coherent linguistic landscape. There are instances, however, in which the language of private signs is quite discordant with the language profile of government signs. More often than not, there is greater language diversity in private than in government signs.

Landry and Bourhis (1997) distinguish between private and government signs, which is similar to the above mentioned top-down and bottom-up signs but it is less specific if we take into consideration that both private and government signs can be government regulated and government signs can be under more or less local control. Official and non-official signs hence make different contributions to the linguistic landscape of a given place.

In another attempt to establish taxonomy, Reh (2004) proposes three types of arrangement of the multilingual information: signs where all the information is given in both languages; signs where there is partial or overlapping translation; and signs where different information is given in each language.

The objective of reading the meanings of actor's behaviour reflected in the making and use of linguistic landscape elements requires researchers to turn to the major hypotheses offered by sociological theories of social action and consider their respective relevant validity in the present perspective.

Several distinct hypotheses or "structuration principles" (Ben-Rafael 2009: 44) are mentioned in the literature, namely:

1. *Good-reasons hypothesis* – (Boudon 1990) starts from the premise that social action is accounted for by rational consideration of alternates on the side of actors. Following this methodological-individualism approach, actors' considerations inform us about choices determined by interests in attainable goals, i.e. linguistic landscape item's relation to clients, sign's expected attractiveness and influence on eventual clients.

2. *Presentation of self hypothesis* – (Goffman 1963, 1981) analyses social action as determined by the drive of presentation of self on the part of actors. This approach is privileged by researchers who investigate the contemporary importance of ethnic communities which aspire to assert themselves on the public scene.

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Participants are divided by aspiration to contrast themselves from others; identity markers of communities would imprint themselves strongly on linguistic landscapes.

According to Ben-Rafael (2009) these two principles outlined above are necessarily constitutive of the study of linguistic landscape especially in central urban areas dominated by consumerist values. However, he also adds two additional principles one can encounter in urban areas, namely, power-relations and collective identity.

3. *Power-relation hypothesis* – (Bourdieu 1983, 1993) contends that social reality is to be seen as consisting of interconnected, yet possibly more or less autonomous, fields of social facts structured by unequal power relations between categories of participants. The relation of different codes in the linguistic landscape i.e. which one predominates and which one holds a secondary importance should be explicable in terms of power relations between dominant and subordinate groups. Power-relations wherever they emerge as factors of regulation of social and political reality refer to the extent to which given actors are able to impose patterns of behaviours on others. We can speak of power-relations wherever the hegemony of a dominant culture diffuses and controls what is "nice" and "decent" and what is not (Ben-Rafael 2009). Such examples of hegemony power can be found in nearly all contemporary nation-states with the imposition of the national language in linguistic landscape items. While the privileged status of national languages is rarely questioned, things stand differently for second and third languages.

4. *Collective-identity hypothesis* – (Tajfel & Turner 1979, 1986) emphasises to whom the actor belongs and wishes to attract potential clients on the basis of common fellowship or likeness. Signs focus on conveying identity markers. It testifies for the special ties binding given actors with specific segments of the public. The more a setting qualifies for its definition as multicultural, the more linguistic landscape should allow room for items to express particular identities – in addition to, or on account of, the room left to symbols of overall-society solidarity (Ben-Rafael 2009: 47).

The four principles outlined above emphasise the way sociological theory may be able to contribute to the investigations of linguistic landscape. However, these principles do not necessarily share the same weight in the design of specific public signs so the linguistic landscape studies should reveal what principles prevail over others.

## Background information

Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda) is a small town with a population of about 38 thousand, with 81% of Hungarian minority population and 17.5% Romanian inhabitants. The region was selected first of all because of its multilingual nature and minority context.

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We all know that Romania has one official language and that is Romanian. However, the use of minority languages in local public administration is mentioned in Art. 120, 2 of the Constitution that says:

> In the territorial-administrative units where citizens belonging to a national minority have a significant weight, provision shall be made for the oral and written use of that national minority's language in the relations with the local public administration authorities and the decentralized public services, under the terms stipulated by the organic law.

The passing of Law no. 215/2001 on local public administration provided Romania with a clearer legal framework for the use of minority languages in the public sphere at local level. According to this law, minority languages may be used orally and in writing in the local administrative units where citizens belonging to a national minority represent over 20% of the populations, in dealings between those citizens and the local authorities and in the replies given by the latter. In addition, minority languages should be used to inform persons belonging to national minorities of the agenda of and decisions taken at local authority meetings and, where one third of the local councils is comprised of representatives of minorities, during the council meetings themselves. The law also provides that local authorities should recruit persons with a good knowledge of the languages concerned to positions involving relations with the public (CoE 24.11.2005, §122 & 123).

Furthermore, as we could notice in the first paragraph of this section, Hungarian minorities constitute the local majority of the town. Thus it is interesting to look at the public signage bearing in mind the power relations between the two major local ethnic groups.

## Research questions

This paper focuses on the use and visibility of different languages in Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda). The sociolinguistic context in which the study was carried out is based on mainly one street and the centre of the town. The study of the linguistic landscape is very interesting in the context of minority languages such as Transylvania and more specifically the Szekler region to see the relative use of the different languages (Hungarian, Romanian, English or other) and the differences between official top-down and bottom-up signs and the use of English.

The specific research questions of this study are the following:

1. *Which are the languages displayed in the linguistic landscape of Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda) and their relative weight?*
2. *What are bilingual and multilingual signs like?*

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## Methodology

The basic premise of linguistic landscape analysis is that visual language use in public spaces represents observable manifestations of circulating ideas about multilingualism (Shohamy 2006: 110). Methodologically, linguistic landscape analysis relies on photography and visual analysis. The core data gathering method is to engage in photography that thoroughly documents defined social spaces (Hult 2009: 90). These may include very specific geographical locations like train stations and their immediate surroundings (Backhaus 2006), specific neighborhoods (Huebner 2006), or a range of localities (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). Generally, researchers conduct comprehensive photography of all visual language use in the social spaces selected for investigation.

The corpus of this study includes a partial inventory of the linguistic landscape of Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda). The streets, areas selected for this study are the main street leading into the town from Odorheiu Secuiesc, namely the Harghita Street, which continues in the Kossuth Lajos Street, one of the main streets in the town crossing its centre. Other streets and areas selected were the pedestrian Petőfi Sándor Street, the Majláth-Gusztáv Square and the main market area, including the Piac (Market) Street.

Digital pictures were taken of texts that were visible on the street. A total of 198 pictures were taken. In many cases there were more pictures taken of a sign or group of signs. In the codification process an establishment stood for a unit of analysis. Thus, for example, if a bank or shop had its name on the front but also a number of advertising posters on the windows it was considered one sign or one unit. This decision is based on the fact that all signs in one establishment, even if they are in different languages, have been the result of the languages used by the same company and give an overall impression because each text belongs to a larger whole instead of being clearly separate.

The pictures were coded including variables such as type of sign, top-down or bottom-up sign, the number of languages on the sign, languages on the sign, first language on bilingual and multilingual signs and the type of font on bilingual and multilingual signs.

## Results and Discussion

This section shows the results of this study which have been arranged so as to answer the two research questions (1) which languages are displayed and (2) the characteristics of bilingual and multilingual signs.

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### Research Question 1: Languages displayed

The first question about languages displayed concerns the number of languages used in each unit of analysis (sign) and the type of these languages, namely what kind of languages appear on the public signs. Looking at the collected data, it can be asserted that almost eighty per cent (78%) of the signs include two languages, 15% have only one language and 7% have three or more. According to these percentages, we can state that in Miercurea Ciuc most of the signs are bilingual.

From the total 198 pictures we can differentiate among official/top-down signs (n=16) and non-official/bottom-up signs (n=182). Looking only at the official signs it could be noticed that except one sign all were bilingual signs. One road sign (see Picture 1) warning drivers about their vehicle being removed if they park illegally involves four languages.

**Picture 1.** *Road sign in 4 languages warning drivers about their vehicle being removed in case of illegal parking*




The next issue related to the first question is the type of languages that are being used. The results are given below in Table 1:

**Table 1.** *Types and percentages of languages on public signs*

| Nr. of languages | Types of languages | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **monolingual** | Romanian | 7.0% |
| | Hungarian | 5.5% |
| | English | 2.0% |
| | Italian | 0.5% |
| | **TOTAL** | **15.0%** |
| **bilingual** | Romanian/Hungarian | 76.0% |
| | Romanian/English | 1.3% |
| | Hungarian/English | 0.7% |
| | **TOTAL** | **78.0%** |
| **trilingual** | Romanian/Hungarian/English | 6.0% |
| | Romanian/Hungarian/Chinese | 0.5% |
| | **TOTAL** | **6.5%** |
| **quadrilingual** | Romanian/Hungarian/English/German | 0.5% |

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As the table above shows, we are dealing with a minority language, Hungarian; with a state language, Romanian and with English as an international language that has gained a certain presence. Other international languages such as German, Italian or Chinese take a modest place.

For the minority language and the state language we can observe that they appear in all types of signs, namely monolingual, bilingual, trilingual and quadrilingual. As far as English is concerned, it mostly appears on trilingual signs (6%). Taking into consideration all signs, the presence of English goes up to 10.5%. Other foreign languages have a very limited presence, with some signs including words in German, Italian or Chinese (one occasion of each).

We can conclude so far that Romanian and Hungarian are the dominant languages and the linguistic landscape reflects this fact. Hungarian as a minority language also has a clear presence and English is the most important as compared to other foreign languages.

The linguistic landscape seems to reflect the general sociolinguistic situation as well as the intensity of language policies for the use of minority languages in the local administration.

## Research Question 2: The characteristics of bilingual and multilingual signs

In this section I will have a closer look at the composition of the multilingual signs. Some examples of these signs can be seen in Pictures 2, 3 and 4.

**Picture 2.** *Romanian-Hungarian text; Romanian partly deleted*




**Picture 3.** *Hungarian-Romanian text; Romanian text smaller text size and different fonts and colour, hardly visible*




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**Picture 4** *Romanian-Hungarian text; Hungarian text size very small, incorrect/partial translation*




We can analyse bilingual/multilingual signs according to the place the languages occupy on these signs, the amount of information given in each language and the characteristics of the translations. The way languages are displayed vis-à-vis each other will give us further information on the relative importance given to each language.

The paper will firstly discuss the place of the languages displayed on the public signs, namely the order of languages, the size and fonts of the letters for each language and the type and colour of the letters and texts.

The first characteristic of the signs analysed was the order of languages on bi- and multilingual signs. The results corresponding to the first language that appeared on the signs show that Romanian constitutes the majority, with 52% followed by Hungarian as the first language on signs with 39% and English with 9%.

Again, looking at official signs, we can see that Romanian is the first language to appear on signs. However, there are a few exceptions among the data. Two official signs were found that included Hungarian as their first language. What is common in the two signs is that they were both created and placed by local authorities.

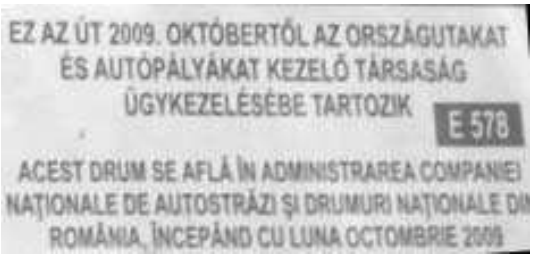
These cases show that in the majority of cases among official signs, the state language as the country's single official language is the first language of signs. This is followed by the minority language as the town reaches or exceeds the 20% of minority population. Yet, the two exceptional signs reveal that the town has a minority population that constitutes the local ethnic majority. Thus, certain signs appear with Hungarian language first, although I could find no consistency in the type of such signs. The two pictures containing Hungarian text first, are shown below:

**Picture 5** *Street name sign*




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**Picture 6** *Road sign informing citizens that the road E578 is under National Road Administration from October 2009*




However, the order of languages does not always imply that the language that appears first is also the most prominent language on the sign. The size and fonts of lettering are also important characteristics to consider. Most commonly the size of the texts on bilingual and multilingual signs is the same but there are several examples where in spite of the fact that Romanian is the first language to appear on the sign, the Hungarian text is much larger and thus more visible. See for example Pictures 7 and 8.

**Picture 7.** *Driver's Education*




**Picture 8.** *Pharmacy*




Another characteristic of bi- and multilingual signs that were analysed was the amount of information given in each of the languages. The analysis showed that 71% of the signs gave the same amount of information in all languages they contained. 9% of the signs had more information in Romanian and Hungarian than in English (English being usually used as a slogan). In the case of Romanian-Hungarian bilingual signs, 13% of the pictures contained more information in Romanian (see Picture 9 as an example) and 8% of the signs contained more information in Hungarian.

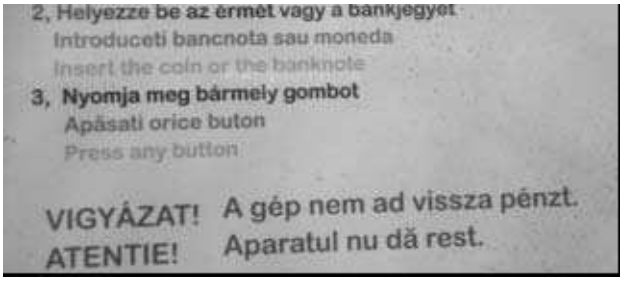
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**Picture 9.** *Romanian-Hungarian bilingual sign, with only one item translated*




A final characteristic included in the study was a focus on the use of translations in the signs. Apart from the general negligent characteristic of most of the signs encountered (missing accents, misspellings, etc.) translations present another problem in many cases. In the majority of cases, as it was mentioned above, the same amount of information is provided often using word-to-word translations. However, it was interesting to analyse partial translations or signs which contained different information in the two languages.

**Picture 10.** *Instructions on a parking ticket vending machine, warning drivers only in Hungarian and Romanian that the machine does not give change*




Picture 10 above presents several characteristics to be analysed from the point of view of the linguistic landscape. First, if we look at the number of languages, we can state that it is a trilingual sign. Second, taking a closer look at the order of languages and the text formats in each language, what can be seen is that Hungarian is the first language, followed by Romanian and English. The visibility of each

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language matches the order of appearance, Hungarian being the most visible language and the intensity of the colour gradually fades from black to light grey. The information displayed on the machine is given in three languages, except one warning, that the machine does not give change. The respective warning appears in red colour with similar letter shapes in Hungarian first, then in Romanian.

## Conclusions

Summarising the findings it can be said that there are several languages that are present in the signs in different proportions. Romanian and Hungarian are the dominant languages, while English is less prominent. It is mainly used in the names of commercial places or slogans.

The majority of the signs are bilingual and the presence of Hungarian monolingual signs or bilingual signs with Hungarian being more visible shows that Miercurea Ciuc is a Transylvanian town where minority Hungarian population constitutes the local ethnic majority.

This study shows that linguistic landscape has both informational and symbolic function. The informative function shown in the signs in the different languages indicates the language to be used in communication in shops and other businesses and also reflects the relative power of different languages.

The use of the different languages also has a symbolic function. According to Bourhis (1997: 27) the use of a specific language "can contribute most directly to the positive social identity of ethnolinguistic groups". The use of Hungarian is not only informative as people can get information in Romanian as well, but it has an important symbolic function which is related to affective factors and the feeling of Hungarian as a symbol of identity.

On the other hand, the use of English in commercial signs could be interpreted as informational mainly for foreign visitors but it is obvious that its increasing presence has a strong symbolic function for the local population. Using English can be perceived as more prestigious and modern than using the local languages (see also Piller 2001, 2003).

This study is limited to the analysis of linguistic signs in only a part of a small Transylvanian town, but shows the important role of the linguistic landscape and its relationship to the sociolinguistic situation and linguistic policy in multilingual contexts.

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