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Linguistic landscape as an arena of conflict

Language removal, exclusion, and ethnic identity construction in Lithuania (Vilnius)

Irina Moore

20.1 Introduction

Imagine a world without public signs: no street names or airports, train stations without information boards, public buildings without signs directing us to different floors and services, ‘naked’ roads and motorways, supermarkets without marked aisles or price tags. Public signage is one of the most useful features of modern life, which most of us take for granted.

We live in an increasingly globalised multilingual world that builds complicated spaces. To navigate through world cities, we rely on public signs. That is why “wayfinding”, a term coined by the American urban planner Lynch (1960), has become a special professional field of wayfinding designers. It has grown exponentially since the 1960s, as businesses have realised that well-organised wayfinding systems can have financial benefits. The field has been expanded to include marketing and advertising, which are omnipresent in commercial signs. “Written language is an important part of these multimodal messages” (Gorter, 2012, p.1), and it is not surprising that the development of wayfinding also attracted the attention of linguists interested in understanding how languages and images in public spaces can be interpreted as “maps of meaning” (Jackson, 1989) that represent our society and reflect the complex sociocultural and political forces that create it. Their investigations have extended beyond commercial public signage to included non-commercial, official and non-official signs. These studies are known as Linguistic Landscape (LL) studies, a rapidly developing multidisciplinary field that is proving of interest to researchers from a variety of different backgrounds, including linguistics, sociology, anthropology, urban studies, politics, semiotics, education and economics. The common interest of all is the understanding that LL is the scene where public space is symbolically constructed (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006, Shohamy and Gorter, 2009). The construction is created by the markings of objects – material and immaterial – with linguistic tokens. These tokens may be analysed according to the languages used and their importance and prominence in the LL, as well as their syntactic and semantic aspects.
The term “Linguistic Landscape” can be traced to a 1997 article by Landry and Bourhis, in which they define it as meaning “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” (1997, p.25), but the interest in languages in public spaces has a longer history. The first sociolinguistic studies to investigate public signage appeared in the 1970s (Masai, 1972, Tulp, 1978). Masai’s study focused on language choices in what were perceived to be monolingual areas of Tokyo. It discovered the presence of English in addition to Japanese. Tulp’s research in the officially bilingual Brussels uncovered the predominance of French. In the 1980s and 1990s, these projects were followed by a number of idiosyncratic studies into the role of global English in multilingual settings and language maintenance and vitality in bilingual settings.

By 2005, the body of work in this area was sufficient for Gorter (2012) to say that, across the world, the interest in the study of LL is growing. Shohamy (2016) noted that 2006, the year of publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Multilingualism*, edited by Gorter, became the date of the establishment of regular LL research with a focus on multilingualism. This special issue was later published as a book (Gorter, 2006) that became one of the first publications to set a more solid foundation for LL research. An annual international LL Workshop was organised in Tel Aviv in 2008, and since then nine such workshops have taken place around the world. The tenth was held in 2018 in Bern, Switzerland. These workshops resulted in the publication of collections of LL studies that expanded the methodological and theoretical frameworks of the field and revealed its multifaceted applications (Hélot and Barni, 2013, Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010, Shohamy et al., 2010, Shohamy and Gorter, 2009).

More thematically-specific collections have appeared in recent years (Blackwood et al., 2016, Laitinen and Zabrodskaja, 2015). These collections have yielded innovative findings about identity, language policy, language conflicts, language justice and language rights. The topic of conflict, in particular, has been the focus of researchers for a number of years (Papen, 2012, Philipps, 2012, Shohamy, 2006), culminating in the publication of *Conflict, Exclusion and Dissent in the Linguistic Landscape* (Rubdy and Said, 2015). A new research journal, *Linguistic Landscape*, has been published since 2015 by John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Many earlier studies of LL were based on an exploration of the texts displayed in public space and employed mostly quantitative analysis of data. Some researchers focused on a particular type of sign, such as billboards, shop signs and names, road-signs or brand names. Some included all these texts, while others included non-static objects, such as transport, clothes and even language used on the internet. More recent research puts an emphasis on “expanding the scenery” (Shohamy and Gorter, 2009) of LL beyond the initial writings and introducing wider and more diverse views. It asserts that LL is a broader concept than the simple documentation of linguistic tokens. It incorporates multimodal theories that include monuments, sounds, images and graffiti. A new term has been suggested by Jaworski and Thurlow (2010): “Semiotic Landscape”. This term is motivated by the fact that, in our modern multimedia world, social space is used as a semiotic resource in which language and space interact very closely. It claims that LL is not a neutral phenomenon; it needs to be contextualised in a contested sphere of the “free” space that belongs to “all”. It studies public space in the contexts of identity and language policy of nations and political and social conflicts. This approach requires qualitative and interpretive analysis of data or a mixed-methods approach that “combines a quantitative survey of the linguistic landscape with a qualitative component” (Rubdy and Said, 2015, p.8).
In their seminal article, Landry and Bourhis (1997) highlight two basic functions of LL: an informational function and a symbolic function. The former provides an insight into the distribution of languages in a particular area and the power relations between the different language groups in that area, while the latter is connected to the identity of the area’s language users and inhabitants, particularly “in settings where language has emerged as the most important dimension of ethnic identity” (Landry and Bourhis, 1997, pp.25–9). Current research has opened up new areas of exploration that analyse how LL can help to uncover explicit and implicit forms of language exclusion and suppression that lead to ethnic conflicts. Also, signs can be studied as a form of political activism “indexing contestation and dissent in situations of social and ideological conflict” (Rubi dy and Said, 2015, p.3).

Due to the continuing development of LL and its multidisciplinary nature, researchers in this area employ a variety of methodologies. For example, the contributors to the volume Conflict, Exclusion and Dissent in the Linguistic Landscape (Rudby and Said, 2015) analyse the LL in their studies using various methods. Their mostly qualitative interpretive frameworks utilise a range of analytical instruments from sociolinguistics, anthropology, cultural geography, language policy, semiotics and urban studies, to name just a few. Gorter (2006) notes that the theoretical framework in which the analyses are done differs among the various studies, concluding that “The approach still has to be developed further” (Gorter, 2006, p.3).

In post-Soviet studies, LL has emerged both as a space where language conflicts are particularly visible and as a tool for the analysis of the changing linguistic situation (Pavlenko, 2009). My aim is to illustrate that sociolinguistic changes in Vilnius, which I have chosen as a case study, are much broader than simply a change in languages used in public signage. The context of de-Sovietisation in the Baltic States calls for an interpretation of the LL concept that takes into account the cultural and physical landscape (Czepczyński, 2008, Herrschel, 2007), including monuments and everyday items. Therefore, I adopt elements of different theoretical frameworks for my analysis. Theoretical focus on power relations in social sciences (Bourdieu, 1991) and in “monumental politics” from cultural geography (Czepczyński, 2008, Forest and Johnson, 2011, Forest et al., 2004), the anthropological concept of liminality (Van Gennep, 1960), the subjectivist perspective (Goffman, 1963) and a methodological approach that “treats space as a discursive as well as physical formation” (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010, p.12) are combined to examine the processes of linguistic tokens’ erasure and replacement and monument destruction, creation and alteration in post-Soviet Vilnius. Analysis of these processes reveals a narrative that illuminates the otherwise hidden, long-established historical conflicts related to the linguistic rights of minorities and identity issues today.

I also use a multimodal diachronic LL analysis in combination with synchronic analysis. Until recently, most Western LL investigations have been dominated by the synchronic approach to the analysis of public space, treating public signage and extra-linguistic signs as static (“here and now”). However, some researchers argue that in order to understand texts, signs and spatial discourse we need what Blommaert (2013) calls “deep ethnographic immersion”. He writes of a need

On the one hand, to grasp the situated and momentary occurrence of a sign in this shop window, on this street, at this time; on the other hand, a need to situate these observations within a much longer historical trajectory to account for the complexity of forces and meanings that dynamically come to bear on the instance of a sign and its interpretation.

(Blommaert, 2013, p.11)
Pavlenko also sees LL studies as dynamic phenomena which should be examined in a dia-
chronic manner (Pavlenko, 2009). Following Blommaert and Pavlenko, I believe that this
approach is particularly useful in the analysis of post-Soviet space. As the LL of ex-Soviet
republics experienced massive transformations over the last 25 years, the interpretation of
LL data there should be connected with the history of their cities and neighbourhoods.

This chapter will expose historical and modern ethnic tensions in Lithuanian society. We
will analyse how written languages interact with the physical features of the cityscape to
construct new landscapes and express ethnic conflicts, exclusion and inequality resulting
from sociopolitical and ideological power changes. This approach emphasises the impor-
tance of LL in a socio-historical context and leads to a greater understanding of the identity
and language rights issues of national minorities that are not reflected in the current legisla-
tive system. It illustrates that language is key to managing and resolving such conflicts.

The discussion is backed by a corpus of more than 450 photographs collected with kind
permission from the Polish National Digital Archive, Lithuanian State Archive, newspapers
and private photo and postcard collections, and by the author’s photographs taken during
field trips to Vilnius (2015–17).

20.2 Vilnius – The present and the past

On arrival at the airport in Lithuania, visitors are greeted with the name of its capital, Vilnius.
Exiting the Oro Uostas (“airport”), we can catch a bus to Stotis (“railway station”) (Figure
20.1) and walk from there to explore the main street of the old city. The Lithuanian language
is everywhere, and we do not even stop to think that this could be any different. However,
Vilnius is a city inhabited by people of 128 ethnicities (Population and Housing Census of

Modern Vilnius is the “focal point of modern politics” and what we see today “is the
result of homogenising and nationalising efforts of the state” (Weeks, 2015, p.1) to nation-
alise urban space and represent the nation since the declaration of independence in 1989.
Strong attachment to the national language and the metaphor of its displacement in Soviet
times became key elements in the self-identification and strict policy of titular monolingual-
ism. To understand why and how the Lithuanian language assumed such a strong symbolic
function in post-Soviet times, we turn to a diachronic analysis of the sociolinguistic land-
cape of Vilnius.

The city’s importance to a variety of cultures and ethnicities is unparalleled. Through
centuries, “it occupied a central place in the national identity of Lithuanians, Poles, Jews,
and Russians” (Weeks, 2015, p.1). As we can see from the next sections, the very name of
the city has changed several times over the centuries, reflecting cultural, demographic and
political power shifts, accompanied by linguistic tensions and conflicts.

20.2.1 The Russian Empire (1864–1917)

The diachronic Linguistic Landscape analysis of public spaces in Vilnius combined with
the synchronic-descriptive approach yields a very complex sociopolitical narrative related
to the historical processes of Polonisation, Russification and Lithuanisation of the city. It
uncovers the roots of longstanding ethnic tensions between Lithuanians, Poles and Russians,
which are still evident today. I chose the period from 1864 as the starting point of the dis-
cussion, as there is very little visual evidence available from earlier periods.1 Our collection
of more than 450 photographs from different historical periods shows a variety of public
signs and monuments that make the linguistic landscape of Vilnius resemble a palimpsest: signs being continually changed and overwritten in different languages (for a more detailed discussion, see Moore, 2019).

We will attempt to decipher this seeming disorder, however chaotic it appears to be, using the structuralist methodological principles developed in social science and cultural geography. The first is attached to the name of Bourdieu (1991), who put forward the suggestion that social reality consists mainly of power relations between categories of participants in given social fields (urban spaces in our study). From this perspective, the relationships between different codes in LL could be explained in terms of power relations. The second is connected with monumental politics – the study of monuments, memory and public spaces – which asserts that elites create nations by constructing shared national identities via processes of monument creation, destruction and alteration (Forest and Johnson, 2011).

Our “photographic walk” through the streets of Vilna (as it was known under Russian rule) between 1864 and 1905, would have left us in no doubt that we were in one of the cities of the Russian Empire. Street names were in Russian and shops were required to have Russian signs or inscriptions at least as large as those in other languages (Weeks, 2004).

The majority of signs in our corpus are commercial. Russian dominates, as Figure 20.2 illustrates.

The intensive Russification of public spaces in Vilnius during this period is considered to be a harsh response by the Tsarist government to the 1831 and 1863 insurrections against Russian rule. From a Bourdieusian perspective, power relations reflect the extent to which social actors are able to impose their symbols, actions and behavioural patterns on others, even against their will (Bourdieu, 1983, 1991). In relation to LL, this structuralist principle “may transpire in the stronger social actors’ capacity to impose limitations on weaker actors’ use of linguistic resources” (Shohamy et al., 2010, p.17). Vilnius University, the centre of Polish culture, was closed in 1831. Schools whose language of instruction was Lithuanian were also closed (Stražas, 1996). Officially, the speaking of Polish and Lithuanian in public was forbidden. The Lithuanian Press Ban was imposed from 1864–1904. It forbade the publication or import from abroad of Lithuanian-language publications in the Latin alphabet. Only Lithuanian books using Cyrillic script were permitted. There was also strict censorship of Polish publications. Although before then, Vilnius had been under Russian Imperial rule for 69 years, the consistent Russification did not begin until the post-insurrection period.

The linguistic landscape of that period could be analysed as a sociocultural “artefact” of its time. Simultaneously, it was also a tool for an “analytic arrangement of space” (Certeau, 1985) to produce a landscape of Russian power. The “Russianness” of the city was also accentuated by monuments, such as that of the Russian Empress Catherine II (Figure 20.2b) and various imperial Russian statesmen. During times of crisis, political actors employ monuments as vehicles to legitimate their claims on power and their visions of society. These symbols, in turn, declare publicly which groups and histories the official sphere recognises as central to the state’s identity (Forest and Johnson, 2011).

However, this hegemonisation through spatialisation produced only “a very thin and fragile Russian veneer” (Weeks, 2004, p.4). The Lithuanian Press Ban and the policy of linguistic and cultural Russification also had an effect on the comparatively small and politically passive Lithuanian population. During this time a number of illegal Lithuanian-language periodicals emerged, urging resistance to Russian assimilation. Although most ethnic Lithuanians lived in the countryside, and their language was rarely heard in the city, the national movement gained momentum after the Press Ban. It became known as the “book carriers’ time” (knygnešiai in Lithuanian). Book carriers smuggled Lithuanian-language
books in the Latin script printed in Lithuania Minor (a historical ethnographic region of Prussia, later East Prussia in Germany). This helped to identify language as central to the national Lithuanian identity (Clarke, 2006a) and is still vital in understanding sociolinguistic tensions in modern Lithuania.

After the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, as a concession to the local population and in an attempt to gain their support, the Press Ban was officially lifted and the censorship of Polish publications relaxed. The first non-Russian newspaper published in Vilnius was a Lithuanian language daily called *Vilniaus Žinios* (Vilnius News), which was soon followed by Polish and Yiddish periodicals (Lapinskienė, 2001).

These events and the 1905 Russian Revolution allowed rapid development of a Lithuanian national movement that put forward demands for ethnic-national rights and led to a major event in the history of Lithuania, the Great Parliament of Vilnius (*Didysis Vilniaus Seimas*). This pressed for an autonomous Lithuanian national state, with Lithuanian as the only official language, and changed the name of the city from Vilna to Vilnius in all its documentation. The next decade saw a growing number of Lithuanian language periodicals, primary schools and courses for adults to teach basic literacy, exhibitions of Lithuanian art and publications of Lithuanian poems and songs (Zinkevičius, 1994). The growing visibility of Lithuanian culture was also reflected in the city’s urban space. The language made an appearance on some public signs, mostly in combination with Russian or Polish. Figure 20.3 shows a private Lithuanian school with a Russian-Lithuanian sign (Russian text on the left and Lithuanian on the right). The position of languages on signs is one of the aspects commonly analysed in modern synchronic studies of linguistic landscapes and can be also very useful in diachronic analysis.

The visual hierarchy, i.e. the presentation and placement of texts in respective languages, allows researchers to analyse their sociopolitical positioning. Scollon and Scollon (2003) argue that “privileged” languages usually appear “earlier” in the sign (at the top, on the left or in the centre), whereas “lesser” languages tend to appear at the bottom, or on the right. If we look through this analytical lens, Lithuanian appears in the “underprivileged” position (on the right).

Another interesting aspect of sign analysis is their distributional patterns: do they appear on the periphery, in the centre, near the entry points of the city, etc. In central locations, signs tend to follow official regulations and often reflect power and cultural dominance, while away from the main streets, signage tends to reflect new informal developments in sociopolitical and cultural stratification. The sign in Figure 20.3 is located on a small side street in the old part of the city. The signs on photographs from that period depicting the main streets of Vilnius and the main entry point to the capital (railway station) contain either Russian or Russian and Polish (Figure 20.4). The absence of Lithuanian in central locations may indicate that “in politics much of the old remained” (Weeks, 2015, p.93), despite the growing visibility of Lithuanian culture and the assertiveness of the national movement.

Russian was still the *de jure* language in this corner of the Russian Empire, and Polish the *de facto* language of urban self-government and high culture.

However, 1905 was a crucial year, seeing the expansion of the city’s sociopolitical and cultural sphere in different languages. Lithuanian claims to the city were seen as a potential threat to Russian and Polish culture.

The start of the First World War meant that the Lithuanian threat to Polish Vilno (as it was known in Polish) was not immediate. In September 1915, as German troops entered the city and forced the Russians to leave, the German commander proclaimed that the Russian army had been expelled from the Polish city Wilno, which was “always the pearl in the glorious
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Kingdom of Poland” (Pfeil, in Weeks, 2015, p.100). Other ethnic groups were not mentioned in this proclamation, but they saw the Germans as liberators and anticipated better treatment than they had received under the Tsarist regime (Burhardt, 1934, Pukszto, 2002). At first, their hopes seemed to be supported by a swift de-Russification of the city and the seemingly liberal German cultural policy.

The three years of power change from Russian to German were accompanied by a great landscape sweep which is a part of van Gennep’s anthropological progressive model of liminality. According to this model, all societies follow a three-fold structure of rites of passage during times of major sociopolitical transformations (Van Gennep, 1960). This includes a pre-liminal (separation) phase, liminal (transition) phase and a final post-liminal phase (reincorporation). The separation phase is based on defining the new power and new coding during the transformation period, and also features cultural cleansing. Landscape sweep usually occurs directly after the process of separation and consists of the removal of unwanted codes and symbols, renaming, rededication and re-use of the old symbolic heritage. In terms of LL, the new power actors introduce new language policies that are reflected in urban spaces, such as street names and monuments. For example, one of the first decrees issued by the new German power stated that the language of instruction in schools should be the mother tongue of the pupils (Polish or Lithuanian), but not Russian. The defeated Russian army took with it many symbols of its dominance, including the monument of Catherine II. Many street signs were torn down or defaced and shop signs painted over or had their Russian components removed (Weeks, 2004). Overall, the face of the city reflected the constantly changing sociopolitical conditions and illustrated how they were negotiated and contested.

The liminal phase is characterised by a mélange of meanings and representations. The old landscape is reinterpreted and decontextualised, while the new landscape is constructed, both physically and mentally. On the surface, this often results in a chaotic LL that is “no longer typical of the previous regime, but at the same time quite different from the aspired one” (Czepczyński, 2016, p.72). For example, this could be seen in photographs taken in Vilnius in 1915. Although they depict the addition of German to the public signage, they show that it often coexisted with surviving Russian signs, or was used in bilingual German-Lithuanian and German-Polish signs (Figure 20.5).

However, our analysis of distributional patterns of official signs in prominent positions (street names, railway station signs, etc.) reveals that the only language used was German, signalling the ruling power. As one contemporary observer wrote: “The city has entered the newest phase in its cultural development, which has swept away the earlier periods of Lithuanian, then Polish, and finally Russian influence” (Friedrichsen in Weeks, 2015, p.107).

20.2.2 Polish Vilno (1918–39)

In this section, I look at the third and final phase (reincorporation) of Van Genepp’s liminal rites of passage and how it is expressed in the LL of the city, which continued to be a contested territory. By October 1920, Vilnius was again under Polish control. It was incorporated into Poland in 1922 and remained so until 1939. The Lithuanian government moved temporarily to Kaunas, which was not considered the true capital. The Vilnius Question grew into a national obsession with retaking the city (Davoliūtė, 2013, p.27).

Polish authorities embarked on a process of re-establishing a Polish Vilno, starting yet another pre-liminal phase in its historical development. Being constantly “dislocated”
during the interwar period, it became an urban palimpsest reflecting the conflicts and aspirations of different power groups. Landscape sweep was initiated once again, illustrating that language removal and replacement in cityscapes are examples of the reappropriation of public spaces connected with the processes of power change and national self-determination. Three photographs in the data of the same Military Hospital during different “power periods” illustrate the city’s “dislocation” and appropriation by Russian, German and Polish powers and show the importance of LL in such conflicts (Figure 20.6).

The building was used as a hospital for military personnel by each changing power and was an important representation of its hegemony in the city. It reflected the language of the political elite even during comparatively short periods of domination, when less important commercial signs, such as those above, represented mixed and unstable codes. The spatial representation of power structures produces a picture of the dislocated world as coherent and stable (Czepczyński, 2008), something that creates and consolidates national memory. As discussed in Section 20.2.1, space equals power and produces “ideological closure” (Laclau, 1990).

The analysis of the Vilnius cityscape during these years indicates that Polish “re-branding” was as important a tool in the consolidation and stabilisation of Polish rule as the closure of Lithuanian schools and the reopening of a Polish university. Many streets were renamed. While Germans simply translated the Russian name of the main street, the Polish authorities renamed it after their national poet Mickiewicz, thus not only emphasising their political presence but also interpreting the capital city as a symbol of their national historical continuity.

By the 1930s, the Polish identity of the city was unmistakable. The surface chaos in its LL, which followed frequent power changes after the fall of the Russian Empire, was temporarily resolved, despite the Lithuanian claims for the city from Kaunas. According to Van Gennep’s concept of rites of passage, this could be considered as a final post-liminal incorporation phase, in which the division between “old” and “new” power becomes insignificant and eventually disappears, “the ‘old’ merging and becoming assimilated into contemporary social, cultural and economic life” (Van Gennep, 1960, p.198).

The corpus from this period shows various commercial outlets along Mickiewicz Street, and that Polish radio had its first broadcast. The city’s public transport was another example of Polish social landscape. The first autobuses were purchased in 1926, and by 1930 ran along three routes (Weeks, 2015). All signs indicating bus routes and information at bus stops were in Polish (Figure 20.7a). Polish became the dominant language of the sociolinguistic landscape of Vilnius (known then as Vilno). All signs along the main Mickiewicz Street were now in Polish (Figure 20.7b).

However, the Vilnius Question remained the focus of the Lithuanian-Polish conflict. “Literally dozens of pamphlets and books arguing each side’s case appeared in the 1920s and 1930s. The Poles stressed the present-day ethnic makeup of the city, while Lithuanians relied on historical and legal arguments” (Weeks, 2004, p.22). The anti-Polish propaganda and pro-Vilnius campaigns continued across the border, from Kaunas.

If the sociolinguistic landscape of Vilnius was an example of the Polish hegemonisation of urban space, political posters and commemorative medals became the anti-Polish propaganda weapon of choice. Figure 20.8 is an example of political activism that signals dissent and contestation in situations of socio-ideological and cultural conflicts (Rubdy and Said, 2015). It shows the first of several anti-Polish medals struck in 1920 in protest against the Polish occupation of Vilnius.

The obverse (a) depicts an iron wolf from the legend associated with the city’s foundation: Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas dreamt of an iron wolf standing on a hillside.
He took it as a sign to build a city there, and the wolf became a symbol of Vilnius. On
the reverse (b), the wolf is replaced by a pig devouring the Lithuanian flag. It is wearing
a military hat and its collar is adorned with Polish military insignia. The dates and text
emphasise the juxtaposition of the images: Vilnius 1323: “This was Gediminas’ dream”
(Taip Gediminas sapnavo)/Vilnius 1920, “This was not what Gediminas dreamt about”
(Taip Gediminas nesapnavo). This text implies the historical ownership of the capital by
Lithuanians, which was violated by the Poles.

By the mid-1920s, the anti-Polish medals and posters became bolder and openly urged
the liberation of Vilnius. Figure 20.9 shows a medal issued to commemorate the 600th
anniversary of the founding of Vilnius in 1923, despite the city still being under Polish
control. The medal defiantly declares that Vilnius is the capital of Lithuania (Vilnius
Lietuvos Sostine).

Figure 20.9b uses Rimsa’s design from 1920, but it is now more strident: “Let’s Liberate
Vilnius!” (Vaduokime Vilniu!). The text at the bottom adds to the poignancy of this slogan,
as it calls for donations to a Lithuanian Fusiliers’ Liberation Fund.

The Association for the Liberation of Vilnius was founded in 1925 and became the
most powerful civic organisation in the country (Weeks, 2015). It issued Vilnius Passports
to every schoolchild as “a symbol of belonging to the nation” (Davoliūtė, 2014, p.188),
although many Lithuanians had never been to Vilnius. An aspirational guidebook to the city
with Lithuanian street names was published (Narbutas, 1939).

In modern LL studies, the above examples are considered to be elements of a wider
socio-semiotic landscape, allowing researchers to analyse it not only as an arena of conflict
but also as a mass communication tool of nationalising propaganda. It emphasises “the way
written discourse interacts with other discursive modalities” (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010,
p.2), thus broadening our understanding of the LL towards symbolic practices. Although the
city remained under Polish control until 1939, this symbolic appropriation of the city helped
to keep the idea of Lithuanian Vilnius alive.

20.2.3 The Second World War (1940–4)

The stability of the LL in the post-liminal Polish phase of the city turned out to be shortlived.
As Czepczyński noted, the liminal transformation of a cultural landscape “may consist of
multiple separations, transitions and re-incorporations” (2016, p.72). The cataclysms of the
Second World War changed the “national face” of Vilnius again. As a result of the Molotov-
Ribbentrop Pact, the Red Army took over the city in September 1939, and it was transferred
to Lithuania. The Lithuanian Army entered Vilnius displaying a victorious slogan saying
“Vilnius inhabitants welcome Lithuanian army”.

However, “Lithuanian soldiers were astonished that they could not communicate with the
local population, and officers were forced to resort to French and German to ask for direc-
tions” (Snyder, 2002, p.47). The population of Polish Vilno did not speak the Lithuanian
language, but despite this, official Lithuanian propaganda spoke of liberating the city and
“restoring” its Lithuanian identity. The first changes involved changing street names from
Polish to Lithuanian. Many of these names were indicated in a guidebook published shortly
before the return of the city, and now the “imagined Vilnius” was translated from this book
to the actual cityscape (Weeks, 2015, p.153). The replacement of street signs was not fully
implemented, as in a short period of time Vilnius went through three major regime changes:
the “bourgeois” republic (1939–40), the Lithuanian Soviet Republic (1940–1) and the Nazi
occupation (1941–5).5
As illustrated in Section 20.2.1 by the structuralist methodological principles, each new regime was concerned with the transformation of city space as a means of establishing its ideology and power, in which the “battle” of street signs is usually the first visible transformation of any regime change. The “bourgeois” Lithuanian Republic would not permit Polish street names, and the Soviet Lithuanian Republic would not allow “bourgeois” names. Soon after the establishment of the Soviet regime, plans were made to rename over 100 streets and squares. For example, names with religious connotations were to be changed and replaced in accordance with Marxist-Leninist ideology (e.g. Church St became Citizens St) (Weeks, 2015, p.165). However, these plans, with some exceptions, remained on paper, as Germany invaded Vilnius in June 1941 and introduced more changes.

By tracing the history of the different names of the main street of Vilnius, we can visualise the city’s turbulent history and the changing fate of its inhabitants. The main street, built in 1836, was initially known as St George Avenue (Russian: Георгиевский проспект), then Mickiewicz Street (Polish: ulica Mickiewicza), and then as Hitler Street during the Nazi occupation. In 1940, at the beginning of the Soviet occupation, it was called Stalin Avenue, later renamed Lenin Avenue. Its present name, Gediminas Avenue (Lithuanian: Gedimino Prospektas), was used from 1939 to 1940, and again since 1989.

Of course, the naming of streets is only one of a multitude of methods used by state power for symbolic appropriation of a city. As Weeks states, the process of reappropriation requires “political power and soft (propaganda, culture, education) and hard policies (repression, prohibition of languages, restriction of religion, and even the extremes of ethnic cleansing and genocide)” (2015, p.3). Examples of these political practices can be seen in the changing face of Vilnius through the centuries. The size of this chapter does not allow us to discuss the large-scale population displacement, mass deportations and elimination of various ethnic groups in Lithuania, but these processes are important in understanding the historical background of current tensions and conflicts.

The first year of Soviet rule was accompanied by mass arrests of “anti-Soviet socially harmful” individuals. 19,000 were deported during the first month (Grunskis, 1996, p.23). The deportations were not selected on the basis of ethnicity, as the deportees were roughly representative of the population as a whole (Balkelis, 2005, Davoliūtė, 2013). These repressions were one of the reasons why many Lithuanians welcomed the Nazis. They hoped for the restoration of independence, but the Lithuanian government was not recognised, and the Nazis formed their own civil administration – the Reichskommissariat Ostland – paying only lip service to Lithuanian cultural affairs. Newspapers were printed in German and Lithuanian (Weeks, 2015). Poles had few rights, and Jews had none. In July 1941, a decree was issued that all Jews must wear a special patch on their backs and observe a curfew. The Vilnius Ghetto was established in the old quarter of the city. Photographs from this period leave no doubt about the real power landscape of Vilnius under the Nazis.

As discussed in Section 20.2.1, the visual hierarchy of texts in respective languages indicates their sociopolitical positioning. Lithuanian is absent from the official document (Figure 20.11a), although it is signed by Lithuanian administrative representatives. On the ID card (Figure 20.11b), Lithuanian appears in the “underprivileged” position (on the right).

Other photographs from the data support the statement that the “capacity of social actors to actively impose and engage their cultural productions and symbolic systems plays an essential role in the reproduction of social structures of domination” (Czepczyński, 2008, p.45). “Symbolic capital” is expressed through power over the landscape in the form of Nazi symbols in central locations (Figure 20.12a) and the “privileged” position of German on public notices. On street signs, German was above and Lithuanian below (Figure 20.12b).
By 1944, the city was fated to go through yet another liminal rite of passage due to a power change. As the Red Army progressed westwards, “Stalin decided that Vilnius was to be Lithuanian” (Snyder, 2003, p.88). In 1945–6, 170,000 ethnic Poles were “repatriated” to Poland and the Lithuanian countryside during the post-war population exchanges negotiated by the Allies (Davoliūtė, 2013). Vilnius became the capital of Soviet Lithuania.

20.2.4 Soviet Vilnius (1944–91)

Although Lithuanian Vilnius has been the goal of the Lithuanian nationalist movement since its inception in 1905, the Soviet period in Lithuania is often characterised by cultural Sovietisation and linguistic Russification, which “once again presented the Lithuanian nation with a challenge to the survival of its identity” (Clarke, 2006b, p.165). This analysis reflects the fact that Sovietisation was imposed by force and provoked armed resistance, crushed by early Soviet political repressions and mass deportations between 1939–47: “In popular and official Lithuanian memory today, the Soviets were nothing less than agents of genocide” (Davoliūtė, 2014, p.108). On the other hand, a number of researchers have recently tried to establish a link between the development of Soviet Lithuanian identity, the nationalising drive of the interwar republic and the early Lithuanian nationalist movement, which highlights the national character of Lithuanian Sovietisation (Davoliūtė, 2013, 2014, 2016, Snyder, 2003, Weeks, 2015). From this perspective, Soviet rule in Vilnius can be seen not only as a repressive regime but also as a catalyst for transnational and transcultural processes that brought demographic and linguistic Lithuanisation. Snyder argues that Soviet policies opened political and physical space for the recreation of Vilnius as a Lithuanian city. For the first time in modern history, the Lithuanian language became a badge of status in Vilnius (Snyder, 2003).

The Soviet Lithuanian authorities initiated yet another process of landscape cleansing. The pre-liminal phase of this transformation was characterised by the removal of the Polish identity of the city and its replacement by the Lithuanian one. Even though it had a very strong Soviet symbolic presence, the data from this period supports the second view and reveals a picture of Soviet Vilnius, where “language was a mark of distinctiveness for Lithuanians under Soviet rule” (Snyder, 2003, p.97). The photographs from the late 1940s and early 1950s contain predominantly Lithuanian signs. There is no evidence of the Polish face of the city seen in Section 20.2.2. Instead, there are political signs typical of the era, such as propaganda boards in public institutions (libraries, schools, etc.), slogans from Soviet parades (Figure 20.13) and signs on public buildings (Figure 20.14). It might be interesting to note that, during this separation phase, the new power actors were more concerned with establishing and delivering the new Soviet ideology in the national language than embarking on the Russification of Lithuania, thereby ironically achieving the longstanding dream of the Lithuanian nationalist movement – to see Vilnius as the capital of Lithuania.

If we compare the sociolinguistic landscape of Vilnius under Imperial Russia with the landscape during Soviet times, we can see that the Russian Empire implied a strong degree of Russification. Russian was the language of the imperial bureaucracy and thus held precedence over other languages. The photographs in Section 20.2.1 strongly contrast with the photographs in this section in terms of language distribution and hierarchy. The prominence of Lithuanian at the main entry points to the city and the absence of Russian suggest that the titular Lithuanian language replaced Russian (and Polish) and became the main instrument of Sovietisation, imbuing Lithuanian nationalism with an aura of Soviet legitimacy.
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The pioneers’ parade (Figure 20.13b) is a typical example of the cultural-political events that emphasised the socialist cultivation of youth as the ideal of a bright Soviet future. The slogan displayed below the LTSR coat of arms says Partija – mūsų pergalės įkvėpėjas ir organizatorius (“The (Communist) Party is the inspiration and organiser of our victory”). Thus, the Lithuanian language was used to focus public discourse on the construction of a Lithuanian ethnic identity in a Soviet context.

By the late 1950s, Vilnius also had its share of Soviet monuments, but many Lithuanian writers, composers and communists were also honoured. Many streets were renamed after communist leaders, and even more lost their historical Polish names, assuming Lithuanian ones (Weeks, 2015).

By the mid-1960s, the LL of Vilnius reflected the transition to established Soviet rule. Although the sociocultural landscape of Vilnius continued to be national in nature, the new official Soviet policy of bilingualism meant that documents such as birth and marriage certificates contained Lithuanian and Russian. Street signs and most shop fronts were now bilingual, with the titular Lithuanian language displayed first (Figure 20.15).

Lithuanian was much more prevalent, and Soviet culture in its Lithuanian and Russian guises was unquestionably hegemonic (Weeks, 2015). Between 1960–80, Vilnius grew rapidly and became steadily more Lithuanian. Lithuanian poetry and prose enjoyed notable successes, and Vilnius University became a haven for Baltic studies (Davoliūtė, 2013, Snyder, 2003). Although the data indicates the continuous “bilingualisation” of public spaces, it does not show an increase in Russification. In fact, the patterns of language positioning and use remain similar to those of the 1960s and 1970s. In most top-down controlled locations, the signs are bilingual, with Lithuanian first and Russian second. There is also evidence of monolingual Lithuanian signs, indicating that the policy was not strictly followed either in everyday or official life.

As we can see, the city was now very different from earlier periods analysed in this chapter. Weeks calls this period “socialist normalcy” (2015, p.189), in contrast to the earlier historical cataclysms. Soviet and Lithuanian identities coexisted in the form of a bilingual cityscape in tandem with selected elements of national culture and history. The privileged position of the Lithuanian language “was evident at the university, in the academy of sciences, in the majority of research institutes, in the mass press” (Weeks, 2015, p.191) and even in the local organs of the Communist Party. The data contains a number of photographs depicting official meetings of the Lithuanian Communist Party. These confirm the wide spheres of influence of the Lithuanian language, from shop fronts to the congresses of the Communist Party (Figure 20.16). This situation of “bilingual cultural hegemony” (Weeks, 2015, p.208) led to the virtual disappearance of the earlier Polish identity of the city. The data contains very few images connected with Polish, mostly left on some religious and historical buildings as structural parts of their architectural design.

Although “Soviet and Lithuanian identities coexisted uneasily in Vilnius” (Weeks, 2015, p.191), this was a comparatively stable period in the city’s history. It was no longer dislocated by different powers and ethnic groups, and “had become truly Lithuanian, despite its mixed population” (Weeks, 2015, p.191). This could be considered as the longest post-liminal incorporation phase in the city’s history. Elements of national revival, “albeit under the oppressive and limiting conditions of Soviet rule, fulfilled the long-held dream of Lithuanian nationalists” (Snyder, 2003, pp.91–3).

It appears that Sovietisation involved considerably more than the imposition of oppressive external rule. It shaped the development of national resistance and nation-building, allowing local communists and the intelligentsia to facilitate the creation of a Soviet identity
with a Lithianian nuance. They gained an exceptional level of cultural autonomy and followed the intellectual traditions of the interwar period, which later resurfaced in the cultural movement against Soviet rule (Sąjūdis) and eventually led to the Republic’s independence in 1991.

20.3 Post-Soviet Vilnius (1991–present)

The collapse of the communist regimes in Central Europe in 1989 is one of the recent major political transformations that was followed by major landscape revolutions. Lithuania was the first of the ex-Soviet republics to declare its independence and its Soviet sociocultural landscape was the first to reflect the process of de-Russification and language shift from national-Russian bilingualism to national monolingualism. It was the first in the East European block to face the problem of how to manage the inherited leftover Soviet landscape and the transformation of the political and national identity.

20.3.1 Language policy in Lithuania and the LL of Vilnius

Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, a Decree of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR was issued, declaring Lithuanian the main means of official communication (Decree on Language, 1989). After the declaration of independence, the new Lithuanian Constitution (1992) determined Lithuanian to be the state language (Lietuvos Respublikos Konstitucija, 1992, art.14), which then became the language of the public sphere (Republic of Lithuania Law on the State Language, 1995, IX-954, arts 3–5).

As illustrated earlier, every political transformation is followed by urban landscape rearrangement; languages and space represent opposing ideas that “become enemies and rivals, as well as victims and winners” (Czepczyński, 2008, p.109). In the aftermath of independence, Russian became the “victim”, as it was erased from all bilingual street signs. The de-Russification process was realised by various nationalising linguistic, cultural and semiotic resources. Pavlenko (2009) highlights five processes that illustrate the change in the functions of languages in multilingual post-Soviet societies: language erasure, replacement, upgrading and downgrading, regulation and the appearance of transgressive signs. In Lithuania, the most prominent of these were erasure and downgrading. Figure 20.17 is an example of spontaneous bottom-up erasure by individuals, where the offending Cyrillic script was scratched from a bilingual Lithuanian-Russian street sign.

Such acts were a reaction to the new language policy by individuals who were too impatient to wait for its slower official top-down implementation. However, it was a temporary measure. By the mid-1990s, such signs had been removed and replaced with official top-down monolingual Lithuanian signs. Figure 20.18 illustrates a street name, Pilies g. (Castle St.), which in Soviet days would have been bilingual and contained the name of the street in Russian below its Lithuanian equivalent.

Section 20.2.1 discussed examples of scratching or painting over of parts of Russian signs, when language conflicts in Imperial Vilnius were at their height in 1915. Almost a century later, the historical tensions resurfaced as a language conflict on the street signs of independent Vilnius. The “battle” of street signs was once again the first indication of the new order – the pre-liminal cleansing phase (changing from Soviet to independent Lithuanian Vilnius). After the official re-establishment of independence, many old streets lost their Soviet names and received their historical names again. Figure 20.18 above illustrates one such example. In Soviet days this street was named after the Soviet writer Gorky;
now it proudly bears its old historical name. New streets were named after the leaders and important events of the nationalist movement. For example, book carriers, mentioned in Section 20.2.1, were honoured with street names, museums and monuments.7

Following Van Ganepp’s model, Lithuanian post-communist landscape transformations can be paralleled with liminal passages. The first pre-liminal phase included the most obvious cleansings and changes of the vivid communist iconic landscape features. Figure 20.19 illustrates a wider semiotic landscape cleansing that goes beyond the elimination of linguistic signs – the destruction of Soviet monuments. As part of the monumental politics, it was concerned with the removal of unwanted references and the elimination of “wrong” meanings contained in emblems, logos and coats of arms.

The removal of Lenin’s statue in Vilnius was one of the first of many monumental sweeps. It had stood there since 1952. In August 1991, it was removed by crane in front of cheering crowds, becoming a worldwide symbol of the fall of Soviet power as footage was shown on CNN and reported in the international media.

This process had, generally, ended by the late 1990s. Many of the unwanted codes and symbols, names and labels had been eliminated by the physical destruction and demolishing of features that were hard to reinterpret, followed by elimination from social practices and memories. As Davoliūtė points out, the historical period “from 1940 to 1990 was declared legally inoperative, politically illegitimate, socially perverse, and culturally inauthentic” (2013, p.4).

As discussed above, transition is the most typical second liminal phase. A central part of the transition is based on the rejection of many aspects of the recent past. Almost all revolutions begin with the idea of a “year zero”: a new beginning founded on the eradication of what went before. However, this collective voluntary amnesia is an ultimately untenable position and is usually accompanied by a return to conciliated versions of old pasts or the creation of a new past that supports new identities and aspirations (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 1999). In Lithuania this stage could be labelled as the “return of memory” and consists of two processes: 1) an interpretation of the capital city as a symbol of national historical continuity; and 2) re-construction of a national identity.

In terms of the LL in post-Soviet Vilnius, the power narratives of continuity during this stage are supported through state patronage over cultural heritage. The Department of Cultural Heritage under the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania registers and supervises all monuments of cultural heritage. Databases of cultural heritage are constantly updated. They include various types of cultural heritage units, including monuments, objects of urban heritage and places of historical events.

When the Lithuanian parliament declared independence in March 1990, it did not proclaim a new republic. Instead, it quite deliberately reconstructed the interwar Lithuanian state and reinforced the Lithuanian national roots of the nation. The ancient origins of Lithuania in Vilnius were glorified, with references to key mythical sites, such as the Cathedral Square and Gediminas’ Tower. The Cathedral Square in the Old Town is a symbol of Lithuanian statehood: it is the sitet of two new and important icons of national identity – the statue to the city’s founder, Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas, who ruled from 1316 to 1341, with the iron wolf (mentioned in Section 20.2.2), and the Royal Palace (the original building was destroyed by the Russian Empire in 1801). The statue of the Duke was erected in 1996, and the reconstruction of the Palace started in 2002 (Figure 20.20).

Such developments create new hierarchies and exclusions. If, in 1920s Vilno, the anti-Polish propaganda medals (Section 20.2.2) contested the Polish cultural hegemony, then in 1990s Vilnius, Gediminas’ dream became a new reality. The past hegemonies were now
excluded from the cityscape and “it became clear that Lithuania perceived itself as the homeland of ethnic Lithuanians” (Weeks, 2015, p.211).

Public space is an important political arena for the enforcement of language policies and transformation of practices, because official public signs, such as street and place names, reflect spatial power relations and are sanctioned by local authorities. However, any city is also a composite of its inhabitants and their actions, which function as interfaces between official frameworks and individual experiences. Following Goffman’s subjectivist perspective (1963), which is useful for analysing the subjective dimensions of social experiences, I attempt to illustrate that the individual experiences of Vilnius’ inhabitants do not always coincide with the official power and ethnic narrative. From Goffman’s point of view, identity markers should be clearly visible in any LL.

Despite the strict policy of Lithuanian monolingualism and the fact that the cityscape now reflects its new status as the capital of a Lithuanian nation-state, Russian and Polish can still be heard and seen on Vilnius’ streets, as ethnically non-Lithuanian citizens make up a large proportion of the city. Figure 20.21 illustrates transgressive signs that “violate or subvert official norms in the choice of either script or language” (Pavlenko, 2009, p.264). Although the Law on the State Language in Lithuania decrees that all signs in public spaces “shall be in the state language” (1995, art.17), Figure 20.21 shows trilingual signs placed by private individuals (a) in a café lavatory in central Vilnius frequented by foreign tourists, and (b) on the door of a Roman Catholic cathedral (driven by its Lithuanian and Polish private users with a nod towards visiting tourists). They use English, Russian and Polish, languages that are not sanctioned officially. However, their placement on the signs indicates the underprivileged sociopolitical positioning of Russian and Polish. If we compare the current visual hierarchy of languages with previous historical periods, this is an example of language downgrading. The appearance of English is also an interesting detail, evidencing the role of English as a global language. The visibility of such bottom-up signs in Vilnius is very low, with such signs usually appearing inside commercial and cultural premises.

The disappearance of bilingual Lithuanian-Russian signs – together with the Russian language downgrading, the Soviet monuments’ destruction and Lithuanian symbolic appropriation of the city – is an understandable core element of nationalising processes, state building and identity renegotiation. However, Lithuania is a multi-ethnic country, and Vilnius is its most ethnically diverse city. The next section analyses how the rights of ethnic minorities are observed and discusses whether their legal provision and everyday practices contradict one another.

20.3.2 Ethnic policy in Lithuania and the LL of Vilnius

Despite strict titular language regulations, Lithuania is usually seen by scholars as a pioneer of liberal politics regarding the integration of minorities into the new political system (Andrlík, 2009, Hogan-Brun and Ramonienė, 2005, Pavlenko, 2009, Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004). During the late 1980s, it was the first of the Baltic States to adopt an inclusive national policy. Its Law on Ethnic Minorities (1989) became the first in the whole of the former Eastern Bloc. The explicit promise to protect minorities is also part of two articles of the Constitution that oblige the country to guarantee their rights to use their language independently and to maintain their culture (Lietuvos Respublikos Konstitucija, 1992, art.37 and art.45). Lithuania also chose the so-called “zero option”, granting citizenship to all people residing in its territory at the dawn of independence.
These legal frameworks are the basis for claims that the transition to the titular language was relatively smooth and that Lithuania had few difficulties with its national minorities, managing to avoid major conflicts and tensions (Andrlík, 2009, Hogan-Brun and Ramoniene, 2005, Kolsto, 1993, Pavlenko, 2013). The picture that emerges is of relative peace and harmony. However, focus on the analysis of legislative frameworks excludes public space, presence and visibility of non-majority groups. It also takes no account of mutually contradictory regulations in Lithuanian legislation, which were criticised by the Council of Europe.8

The consideration of public space, rather than legislation, can provide a fuller picture, as it is the arena where language conflicts and ethnic tensions manifest themselves. Public space highlights the physical presence of minority identities and differences. If the state does not allow expression of these differences in public space, it cannot claim that the groups concerned have equal rights to be part of the state’s identity.

This point is particularly relevant as the territorial distribution of ethnic minorities is uneven. Although Poles comprise just 6.6 percent, and Russians 5.9 percent, of the population, there exist multi-ethnic areas in the east and south-east of the country where Lithuanians are in a minority. For example, in Vilnius Region over half the population is Polish (Oficialiosios Statistikos Portalas, 2011). The Law on Ethnic Minorities stipulated that minorities have the right to maintain bilingual signs in areas that have “substantial numbers of a minority with a different language” (Andrlík, 2009, Vasilevich, 2013), but the termination of the validity of the Law in 2010 resulted in a situation where “the legal provisions that allowed the usage of minority languages in the public sphere in Lithuania ceased to exist” (Vasilevich, 2013, p.11).

The right to have bilingual street signs in the predominantly Polish areas is one of the “Polish issues” in Lithuanian public discourse. Most of the bilingual Polish-Lithuanian signs were placed during the period when such rights were provided under the Law on National Minorities. However, since the cessation of its validity in 2010, and despite the ratification of the FCNM, Lithuanian authorities see these signs as illegal and demand their removal.9 The battle of the street signs lasted over four years, until the Vilnius Regional Court judgement of 2013 decided to fine the Administrative Director of Lithuania’s Šalčininkai District Municipality (which is mostly Polish) 100 LTL (€30) for each day’s delay in the execution of the removal order. In January 2014, the director was asked to pay over 43,000 LTL (€12,500). The signs were finally removed in October 2014 (Tarasiewicz, 2014).

This landscape cleansing, 20 years after the initial landscape sweep of the pre-liminal phase discussed in Section 20.3.1, indicates that there is a fourth rite of passage that turns the liminal transformation back again to the initial stage and contradicts van Gennep’s three-stage transformation process. “What seemed to be a linear process, now looks like a circular or liminal spiral” (Czepczyński, 2016, p.73), returning, again and again, to earlier historical and ethnic conflicts.

Language battles can take unexpected forms. For example, conflict and exclusion in terms of symbolic construction could manifest themselves in landscapes, which are characterised “as representation[s] of spaces that privilege subject positions and points of view” (Leeman and Modan, 2009, p.337). In this case, the focus is not on language itself but on the actions connected with language. Figure 20.23 illustrates an interesting case that does not concern a language itself, but the action of rebranding sausages and partially erasing a Russian abbreviation referring to Soviet Lithuania on manhole covers (after more than 20 years of independence). This creates a discursive practice that can shift or reaffirm the relationship of power (Jones, 2010).
Figure 20.23a depicts the brand name “Tarybins” (Soviet), which was created in 1988 and existed happily until 2013, constituting about one-fifth of the meat product market in Lithuania. Its “Soviet” sausages were among the most popular and yielded good profits for the Samsonas company. However, in the wake of the worsening relationship between Russia and Ukraine in January 2013 and the growing support in Lithuania for the Ukrainian independence movement, the company decided to scrap the brand name. Some observers consider that there must be a connection between the rebranding and the visit to Lithuania at that time of the Ukrainian Culture minister. The company’s president explained that the decision was prompted by the political situation. He observed that the “Current geopolitical situation obliges us as dutiful citizens to reject the word ‘Soviet’” (Волкова, 2013).

Figure 20.23b illustrates a partial deletion of the abbreviation in Russian – “LSSR” displacing “SSR” and leaving “Lit” (for “Lithuanian”) on manhole covers in front of the Seimas building in May 2013. In both cases, the word “Soviet” remained in public spaces in the Lithuanian and Russian languages as a part of the final incorporation phase. However, cultural landscapes always represent social, economic, political and cultural trends that can lead to the re-evaluation of landscape elements. Therefore, liminal transition – which is usually ended by the final incorporation – can sometimes be reversed to the earlier phases of transformations and bring to the surface historical and ethnic tensions. These examples raise an interesting question concerning how actors in a given landscape might attempt to shape the landscape itself.

The fight for the symbolic presence of Polish in public space also includes claims for the original spelling of Polish names and surnames in identity documents, and the struggle against amendments to the Law on Education. These issues became a subject of international concern. They were recognised as problematic in legal and practical terms by the Advisory Committee on the FCNM, which urged the Lithuanian government “to address the legal vacuum created by the lapse of the Law on Ethnic Minorities” (Vasilevich, 2013, p.3). The promise to resolve the question of the original spelling of names and dual-language street signs still remains a promise, although in September 2017, the Lithuanian Prime Minister hinted that the time was ripe to solve this issue. The two other issues also remain unresolved.

This “legal vacuum” and the top-down policies of linguistic exclusion intensified the Polish struggle for visibility. This struggle does not seek to enhance communication, but to highlight the physical presence of a minority identity in public space. As a response to the authorities’ reluctance to accept and implement the issues discussed above, the Union of Lithuanian Poles and The Polish Parents’ Forum staged a number of public protests. The central aim of any demonstration is “to influence public opinion, give public presence to specific political positions and change (or form) public understanding, policy and law” (Hanauer, 2015, p.208). This is usually achieved by means of handheld signs, banners, slogans and flags carried by protesters. These make the contested issues visible in the “sanitized” linguistic landscape of the majority (Leeman and Modan, 2010, p.187).

Figure 20.24 illustrates how the Polish minority, excluded from the public sphere, alters the landscape through protest and creates visibility. Such temporary signs become a form of political activism and help to overcome exclusion. The linguistic landscape becomes an essential tool in re-establishing visibility and reappropriating space. Figure 20.24a is an example of a transgressive Polish linguistic presence in central Vilnius. The sign that says “Only morons try to liquidate Polish schools” brings to the surface the exasperation felt by the Polish community at the lack of co-operation with Lithuanian authorities. The Polish and EU flags are a visual reminder of this lack, which exists at both the local level and the international level.
The transient LL of mass protests also acts as a “mechanism to reach audiences of many different cultures and backgrounds” and a mechanism to unify different individual and group identities (Rubdy and Said, 2015, p.1). For different geopolitical and social reasons, the Russian minority does not claim its representation via visibility of the language in public space. However, it supported the Polish minority during demonstrations against education reforms. Figure 20.24b shows how an image of solidarity emerges between Poles and Russians in the contestation of this mutual issue. The slogan in Lithuanian at the forefront places the demonstration in the nation-state context and may be interpreted as demonstrating a willingness to engage in a dialogue with authorities at all social levels. As one of the representatives of the Parents’ Forum at Polish Schools said, “we just don’t see any other way to draw the authorities’ attention to the problems”. Yet, with a series of similar actions planned for the future, the representative insisted that “we will fight until we succeed” (Gulevich, 2016). Therefore, in modern times the public space also acts as a “buffer between the state and private life” (Ben-Rafael, 2009, p.40) that allows a temporary power shift and creates a contestation and negotiation environment for the “excluded” groups.

20.4 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to illustrate how written languages and physical features of the cityscape emphasise the importance of LL in a socio-historical context and enable us to understand that language is key to expressing, managing and resolving conflicts concerning the identity and language rights of national minorities. The analysis incorporated a historical diachronic dimension in observing the changing national face of Vilnius through discourses of different powers via symbolic appropriation of the city in the 19th and 20th centuries. This has demonstrated Week’s (2015, p.3) point that “The Russian, Polish, Soviet, and Lithuanian states all conceived and implemented a very specific type of national-symbolic politics”.

The analysis has also looked at how these historical conflicts, strengthened by modern social-political processes, impact on present-day relations between the Lithuanian state and its minorities and reflect the status of different ethnic groups via exclusion of their languages from the public sphere. At the same time, the discussion analysed modern transient landscapes of demonstrations as a public sphere, where the temporary re-appropriation of space by minorities can lead to discussions and potential conflict resolutions.

From the above, we can conclude that LL is not only an arena of conflict representation but also a tool that aids the struggle of ethnic minorities against dominant language policies and practices. Thus, LL does not only “privilege powerful or majority languages over minority ones”, but also acts as a “representation of spaces that privilege subject positions and points of view” (Leeman and Modan, 2010, p.337). LL is a polyhedral tool of analysis in post-Soviet space: synchronic-diagnostic analysis can be combined with historical diachronic analysis to establish the surface picture, and extra-linguistic semiotic analysis can be used to investigate the deeper implications of language policies and power relations.

Notes

1 Although historical monographs, sociolinguistic studies and memoirs of the city’s inhabitants allow us to take a trip back in history and see the complex picture of identity changes and language conflicts, which resulted from numerous political and social dislocations. A detailed discussion of earlier periods can be found in Weeks (2015).
For example, post-1863, no Polish periodicals were allowed in Vilnius, and one of the largest Polish publishing houses, the Zawadzki firm, “essentially stopped publishing in Polish for forty years” (Weeks, 2015, p.73).

A number of documents from the Russian State Historical archives report that Poles dominated the organs of urban self-government in Vilna, continued to speak Polish, to teach it illegally to their children, and brought in Polish publications from other cities (Weeks, 2004).

There were even fistfights and conflicts over the language of hymns and prayers in mixed Polish-Lithuanian parishes. The Lithuanian position that “Vilnius was and must be their capital city augured ill for the future” (Weeks, 2015, p.94), as we will discuss in later sections.

A detailed account of street name changes can be found in a book by the Lithuanian city historian Antanas Čaplinskas (2000).

For example, the Law on State Language orders all state institutions and local self-government to provide services in the state language (1995, Art.7), but the Law on Ethnic Minorities allows use of the language of minorities by local authorities in the regions, where these minorities represent a significant part of the population (1989, Art.5).

Article 11 of the FCNM (Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities) states that when the area is inhabited by a substantial number of persons belonging to a national minority, the usage of traditional local names, street names and other topographical indications in the language of the national minority should be enabled. Lithuania signed the FCNM in 1995 and ratified it in March 2000 without reservations. Thus, all provisions of this document extend to all ethnic groups residing within the territory of the country (Vasilevich, 2013).

Since 1998, Lithuanian citizens of Polish origin have been asking for the right to spell their names using Polish orthography. This problem boils down to the differences between Polish and Lithuanian alphabets. Although both use Latin script, some Polish letters are absent from the Lithuanian alphabet and vice versa. The practice of personal name spelling in Lithuania is based on the Lithuanian Constitutional Court’s Ruling ‘On Writing of Names and Family Names in Passports of Citizens of the Republic of Lithuania’, which states that all names shall be written in Lithuanian letters (1999).

Amendments to the Law on Education adopted by the Parliament in 2011 stipulate that the geography, history and civic education (citizenship) are to be taught in the Lithuanian language in national minority schools. Previously, only the Lithuanian language was taught in Lithuanian. This Law also makes a provision for the same assignments of the Lithuanian Language Examination to be given to school-leavers of both Lithuanian and national minority schools starting from 2013 (without changing the existing curriculum first) and the abolition of the compulsory examination in minority languages (Kuzborska, 2013).

Most Lithuanian Poles are trilingual (Polish/Lithuanian/Russian).

References


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