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Indexing the Local, State and Global in the Contemporary Linguistic Landscape of a Hungarian town in Slovakia

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On the basis of photography and fieldwork, the linguistic landscape (LL) of the central square of Dunajská Streda/ Dunaszerdahely is analyzed. I focus on commercial names, which dominate the LL of the main square. The research site, a town in Slovakia of which population 80 % is Hungarian speaking, is significant, since historical minorities form the majority in very few European towns.

The characteristics, functions and meanings of a linguistic landscape are best charted through a combination of methods. A distributional account provides us a basic account of what languages there are in the investigated scene. We may compare this with surveys, censuses and other similar cities, as in our case with a Hungarian town in Romania. However, the statistical account fails to examine the signs as images and it implicates a false picture of easily definable languages, whereas in practice it is particularly difficult to classify business names according to a language. In order to analyze signs as images, we need to carry out a qualitative semiotic analysis. The local language ideologies reflected in the linguistic landscape can be charted best by a discourse analytic approach. Thus we can ask, what discourses are participated in the research site by those that produce and interpret the signs.

The distribution of languages in signs displays a global and national (Slovak) namescape in Dunaszerdahely, with a relatively small proportion of minority (Hungarian) company and brand names or other elements. On the one hand, local Hungarians have got used to a commercial LL without Hungarian in the socialist period, thus the use of Hungarian in such signs appeared unimportant in interviews with local people. For local Hungarians, signs in Hungarian indexed non-local firms from Hungary. On the other hand, Slovak language laws made the use of Slovak compulsory, with the exception of business names and global expressions. Hungarian could be used in bilingual signs, however, its use is not encouraged in any way by Slovak language laws.

Global semiotics included the use of innovative business names with visual and linguistic features that do not belong to any language as such. There was a tendency to use special visual semiotics for letters and punctuation in global signs, it was somewhat spread to state language signs, too. Typically, the more designed and branded a business name was, the more global it appeared. In contrast to global brands, the semiotics of a frequent genre of “female” signs index localness, cheap products and a non-polished design. For local shop owners there was a need to (1) index a commitment to Slovakia through Slovak dominant commercial signs, (2) index trendiness, modern and Western values through global names, and (3) index being local through some use of Hungarian, including some substandard forms of Hungarian different from the normative practices in Hungary.

Keywords: Business names, Global(ese), Hungarian minority in Slovakia, Linguistic Landscape, Local, State

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper* is to explore how the local, state and global are **indexed** (see Jaworski, 2013) in the commercial linguistic landscape (LL) of Dunajská Streda/Dunaszerdahely, which is among the few minority towns in Southern Slovakia, where the majority (ca. 80 %) of inhabitants have claimed Hungarian as their first language in the 2011 Slovakian census.^[1] Following J. Blommaert (2013, p. 3), the goal is to provide a “diagnostic of social, cultural and [language] political structures inscribed in the linguistic landscape”. In this spirit, I investigate the central square of Dunaszerdahely¹, to see as E. Goffman (in Kallen, 2010, p. 42) has asked, “What is it that’s going on here?”

My study asks whether the first language of the inhabitants (Hungarian), or the only official state language in Slovakia (Slovak), or rather a global language (e.g. English) are used in commercial signage and in what ways and for what end. I focus on the business name signs, which have been deemed as the most important elements of the commercial LL (Edelman, 2009; Tufi and Blackwood, 2010; Pietikäinen et al., 2011). Through analyzing both language use and visual semiotics the aim is to see how commercial signs as multimodal, semiotic objects construct, maintain and change language ideologies. That is, I investigate how the LL displays ideas of relationships between people, socio-political issues and language (cf. Gal, 2006, p. 388). A further emphasis will be on the agency of those that produce and read the linguistic landscape. That is, the goal is to find out “what actors that produce and interpret the LL actually *do*” (Shohamy, 2012, p. 545).

Building on the research traditions of linguistic landscape studies (for a summary, see Shohamy, 2012), I apply and combine three approaches. First, a quantitative account is provided, that is, the distribution of the languages in the commercial LL of the central square of Dunaszerdahely is described and compared with a similar town in Romania with statistical means. Secondly, the semiotic characteristics of the signs are analyzed to see how commercial signs function as images and how such **linguaging** (e.g. Shohamy, 2006, p. 14ff.) combines with language choice and use. Thirdly, I proceed to analyze the local discourses over what roles languages and semiotic practices have in the construction of different identities.

2. Site of research and data

In the 2011 Slovakian census, Dunajská Streda/Dunaszerdahely had 22 477 inhabitants, of which 17 813 (79.2%) were Hungarian first language speakers.^[1] Dunaszerdahely is located next to villages with a Hungarian majority and is a part of the Hungarian swath in the western part of Southern Slovakia which is seen in the following map:

* This research was financed by the Academy of Finland grant 137718. I thank István Lanstyák, Tamás Péter Szabó, Gizella Szabómihály and Lucia Satinská for their comments on earlier versions.

¹ I use the place names in the language of the majority in the given settlement. I am aware of the debates on the use of Hungarian place names in Slovakia (see Laihonon 2014).

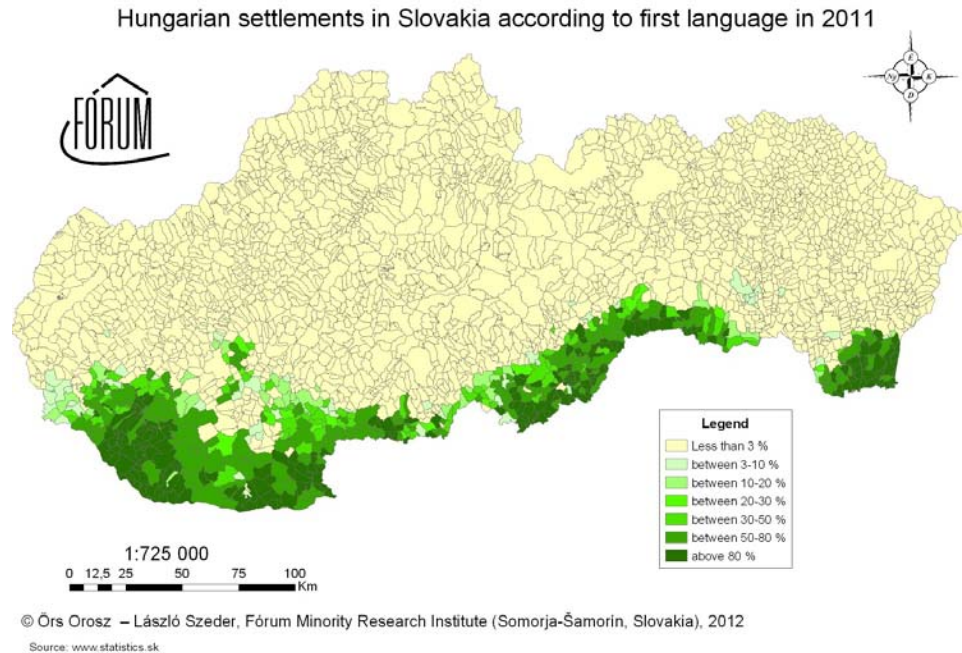


Figure 1. Hungarian settlements in Slovakia in 2011 (courtesy by Örs Orosz)

Dunaszerdahely is a significant research site for the study of European minority situations and urban bilingualism, since non-autonomous, historical minorities form the majority in very few towns. In addition, the study of LL and commercial names in such non-autonomous urban minority enclaves has of yet not been carried out. In East Central Europe the formerly multicultural cities were monolingualised due to Holocaust, deportations and socialist modernization. Today, the majority communities have a clear majority of inhabitants in all towns with over 100 000 inhabitants. In Slovakia Košice and Bratislava (see Satinská, 2013) are good examples of such cities that used to be multilingual, but where there is no minority to reach even 10 % of inhabitants in the census any longer.²

In this study, I examine the linguistic landscape of the Ármin Vámbéry Square, where I³ took 433 photographs in May 2013. In addition to this data gathering, several visits to Dunaszerdahely in 2008 – 2013 and one month fieldwork in two nearby villages in November 2011 (see Laihonen, 2012; 2014) provide the basis of my ethnographic observations. In addition, similar fieldwork and research in other regions where Hungarian minorities form regional majority (Transcarpathia in Ukraine and Szeklerland in Romania in 2011 – 2013), give a comparative angle to my investigation (see also Satinská, 2013 for the LL of Bratislava). In addition to fieldwork, I also asked 4 Slovak and 3 Hungarian speaking colleagues and friends to categorize some ambiguous signs according to language.⁴ This was done in order to verify my ideas about linguistically ambiguous signs.

² However, this might be also due to the census methods (cf. Gal 1993). For instance in the old town of Košice, more than one fourth of the population (ca. 6000 persons) denied to answer the census questions on nationality (ethnicity), mother tongue and language used in public and home. ^[1]

³ I thank István Lanstyák for helping to choose the research site and accompanying me during photography.

⁴ I cordially thank all those that answered my questions, but wished to remain anonymous.

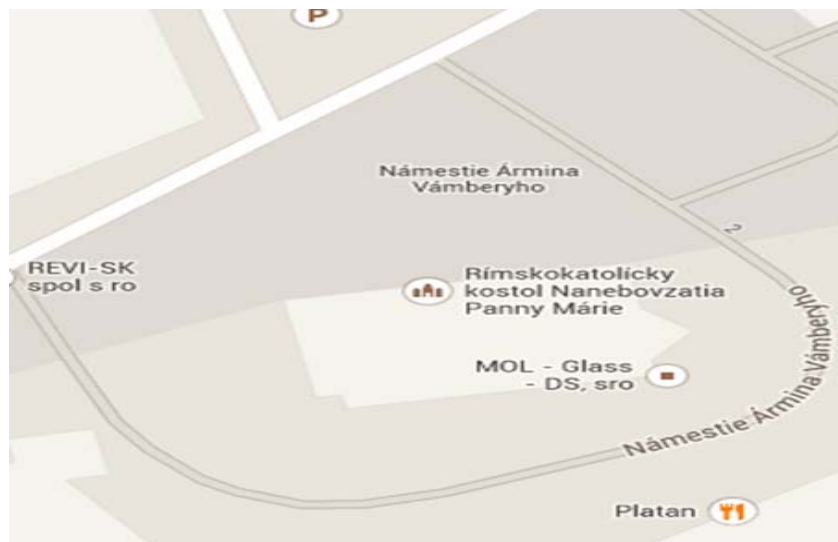


Figure 2. Ármin Vámbery Square, Dunajská Streda/Dunaszerdahely, © google maps

Already in this map of the square we can see displays of the global, the state and local. Google maps recognizes the local (Hungarian) name of the town: Dunaszerdahely, however it does not display it in its maps, where it displays only official place names (that is, place names in the state language: Dunajská Streda). Likewise, the name of the square is only in the official language, Slovak. In the level of the square, there are globally familiar expressions, such as *Glass*. Those familiar with Hungarian, notice that the square name contains a Hungarian personal name Námestie *Ármina Vámberyho*. It is however, adjusted to fit the official language by inflection, adding a classifier (*Námestie*) and changing the word order (the Hungarian word order would be *Vámbery Ármin*).

3. A quantitative approach

A quantitative analysis can offer a basic diagnostic of the field. What languages are there? Is it a monolingual or a multilingual scene? (Blommaert 2013, p. 2–3). That is, what is the situation in the LL of the main square of Dunaszerdahely in relation to local language choice? According to J. Cenoz and D. Gorter (2006, p. 69; cf. Satinská, 2013, p. 91) in multilingual regions, such statistical information “can be compared to the official policy of the region and to the use of the language as reported in surveys”. A distributional account provides a point of comparison between Dunaszerdahely and other similar towns as well. That is, we can see what the relative frequency of minority, majority and global language elements is in the investigated LL.

According to L. Edelman (2009, p. 142), “The main function of shop signs, and therefore of any linguistic material occurring on them, is to persuade customers to buy the products or services available at the stores displaying these signs.” However, this point of view does not mean that the customers always should understand the texts in signs as well. As L. Edelman (2009, p. 143) continues to remark, according to previous research in the area, the frequent “English slogans in Germany do not transmit much factual information but may be used in order to appeal to emotions.” However, she further adds that other, clearly functional texts are typically in a local language (cf. Satinská, 2013, p. 97). In minority regions, as B. Spolsky has pointed out, the situation is even more complicated:

One would expect the normal result of a communicative goal would be a policy to advertise in the language of potential clients and customers. But this is not so... Indifference to language and the

public can produce a monolingual commercial environment, and strong resistance among minority groups to the dominant language hegemony can increase the profitability of bilingual advertising. (Spolsky, 2009, p. 35)

That is, beyond instrumental considerations (advertise in the language of customers, appeal to emotions), ideas about linguistic hegemony and questions of identity and language policy count as well. In the quantitative analysis I follow F. Hult's (2009) practice to combine the function of a sign with language choice. As F. Hult emphasizes (2009, p. 98): "different functional uses of the languages in the linguistic landscape can be read as signs of beliefs about those languages". The function of name signs has been described by S. Pietikäinen et al. (2011, p. 294) as follows: "The language choice in name signs seems to connect, on the one hand, to the producer of the signs and how binding the official regulations are taken to be ..., but also, on the other hand, to the type of identity the various places want to construct through their public signs."

The use of a quantitative approach as a visual methodology has been questioned in general due to the fact that it reduces images to linguistic items and fails to treat the signs as multimodal objects (e.g. Blommaert, 2013, p. 41). To overcome this, a semiotic analysis of commercial signs is carried out in the next chapter. Furthermore, statistical accounts also support a popular view that languages are separate, countable entities with neat borders, which hardly covers the whole picture in the case of the linguistic landscape either. This is so especially in our case, where the major element of analysis is the business **name** (e.g. Edelman, 2009).

Previous research has established that many names "belong" to more than one language. To begin with, L. Edelman (2009, p. 145) emphasized that: "Proper names seem to be more readily borrowed or adopted from another language than common nouns." Even though proper names can be classified according to language, in different contexts they may be assigned to different languages (Edelman, 2009; Tufi and Blackwood, 2010; see also Satinská, 2013, p. 98 for the analysis of *Prešburg*). Figure 3 shows one example from the Vámbery square in Dunaszerdahely:



Figure 3. An ambiguous business name.⁵

⁵ The photographs were taken by P. Laihonen in May 2013. The photographs should not be reproduced without his permission.

When asked about this sign, Slovak respondents thought *Ali Baba* was a Slovak name, whereas Hungarian respondents found it Hungarian. It is not difficult to imagine it as a global (e.g. English) name either. In a statistical account, a separate classification should be made according to other elements (classifiers etc.) in the name sign, which are typically less ambiguous. The name is typically more symbolic (“emotional”) element in such signs, other elements are more functional (or “informative”, e.g. Edelman, 2009; see also Satinská, 2013, p. 90). Finally, previous studies agree on that the business name is the most significant part of a commercial sign. As S. Tufi and R. Blackwood (2010), have emphasized, even though business names can hardly be classified unambiguously to a single language, they should not be left out from **any** discussion of commercial signs.

Keeping in mind the reservations and restrictions of the statistical approach, I will next provide the distribution of language choice in the business names displayed in signs of the central square in Dunaszerdahely compared to a central square in a similar Hungarian town (Gheorgheni/ Gyergószentmiklós)⁶ in Romania. In the table, the frequency of elements in minority, state and global languages in name signs are given. In both cases, most signs have elements from two or three languages.

Table 1: distribution (percentages) of languages in name signs

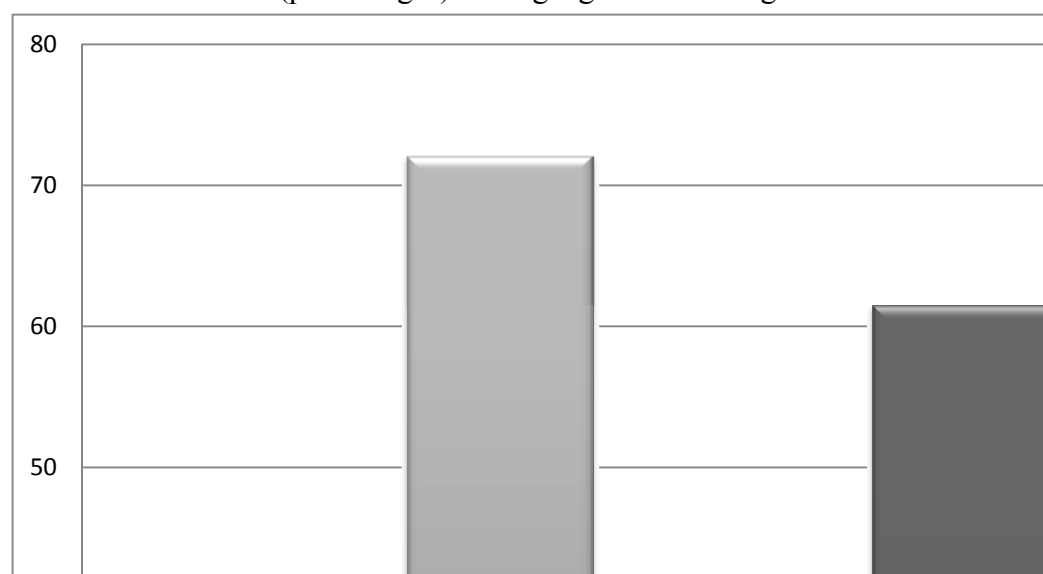


Table 1 indicates that the town in Romania has basically a symmetrical LL according to language choice with a small proportion of global company names. There is also significant difference to Slovakia, where the Hungarian town displays a global and national business namescape, with a small proportion of Hungarian company and brand names.

The rare use of Hungarian can be tentatively explained by what S. Tufi and R. Blackwood (2010, p. 198) have formulated as: “The potential for the identification of a particular language [for brand names] with a specific nation-state”. This seems to be stronger in Slovakia than in

⁶ Gyergószentmiklós has about 20 000 inhabitants, 87,5 % of whom declared Hungarian nationality (ethnicity) in the 2011 Romanian census. ^[2] The data collection and analysis for Gyergószentmiklós was carried out by I. Horváth. I cordially thank I. Horváth’s permission to use this data here.

Romania. The use of a Hungarian name in Slovakia is legal, but avoided, through the indication of being a foreign, non-local business. That is if a business has a Hungarian name, potential customers might think the firm comes from Hungary. Supporting this conceptualization, the two Hungarian dominant signs on the square were advertisements of music groups from Hungary performing in Dunaszerdahely. In addition, Hungarians in Slovakia have internalized the idea of forming a historical part of Slovakian state, and they are committed to living in Slovakia. For instance in Dunaszerdahely, the Hungarian border is about 20 kilometers to the south. However, in comparison to Romania, migration to Hungary is rare. As one local Hungarian entrepreneur stated in an interview: “we live here ... I pay the taxes just like a Slovak”. A further explanation could be that in the socialist era (before 1990), local Hungarians got used to speak Hungarian and to see Slovak written especially in the commercial sphere. That is, in the local conception of different functions of languages, Hungarian is spoken, Slovak written. This is in line with L. Satinská’s (2013, p. 101, translation P. L.) observation that in Bratislava, “Hungarian is a language more to be heard, less to be seen”. As a successful Hungarian entrepreneur stressed in an interview in 2011: “we live here, we have always spoken Hungarian”. That is, the local Hungarian inhabitants are committed to living in Slovakia and speaking Hungarian, but they are used to a Slovak commercial LL.

Another explanation for the dominance of Slovak in the commercial LL can be sought in the realm of language policy. According to the latest (2013) monitoring report of the experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages:

There is a general tendency in the Slovak legislation to restrict the right to use minority languages to certain situations where specific statutory conditions are met. Even in these situations, the legislation often leaves it to the discretion of the authorities to what degree they want to implement the linguistic rights of minority language speakers.^[3]

In other words, the Slovak language laws may be permissive in their letter towards the use of minority languages, however they clearly fail to “facilitate and/or encourage” the use of minority languages “in speech and writing, in public and private life”, as it is requested in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, article 7, 1/d.^[3]

For the case of commercial signs and business names, the Act on the State Language of the Slovak Republic [1996], 2011 says the following:

8 Use of the State Language in Other Areas of Public Communication

(6) All signs, advertisements and notices intended to inform the public, particularly in retail shops, sporting facilities, restaurants, in streets, by and above roads, at airports, bus stations and railway stations, as well as in public transport vehicles, shall be presented in the state language...^[4]

That is, all the signs have to be in Slovak, usually this does not prohibit the use of other languages in bi- or multilingual signs. In fact, the 8 article continues to regulate the use of business names and the use of foreign languages as follows:

(7) The duty established in the subsection (6) shall not apply to business names, trademarks ... nor to the use of a name and surname that are part of a sign, advertisement or notice intended to inform the public nor to certain well-established expressions in foreign languages that are frequently used together with trademarks in the text of advertisements, are known to the general public and are a part of an advertisement.^[4]

website^[5]). So the appearance of such a name as O₂ can be seen as a token of the presence of global economy and investment in Dunaszerdahely.

According A. Jaworski (2013) names such as O₂ are part of **Globalese**, since:

(N)ot being immediately recognizable as ‘English’ or any other ‘ethnic’ or ‘national’ language, does not, turn these forms to non-languages. Rather, they may be more adequately considered to be instances of a multimodal, spectacularized and, commodified register indexing the global, adaptable to any linguistic repertoire, combining elements of visual arts and metrolingual play...it...creates a written-visual register – *globalese* – that indexes Planet Earth as a place by and for an imagined community of cosmopolitans-consumers.

Even though their interpretation and connotations may vary, global names are understood by everybody, whereas according to P. Sjöblom’s study of business names (2013, p. 5): “local features of language are perceived and interpreted only by a local language community and by a local culture – the speakers of one dialect or a language.” The use of minority language can be clearly seen indexing the local, especially in the case where the minority language is in numerical majority, i.e. the dominant vernacular language. From a point of view of visual appearance, local businesses are recognized through somewhat less professional and cosmopolitan branding than global firms. Finally, indexing the state can be defined through the use of the state language in minority dominant environment. In relation to its visual form, the state can be seen to be located somewhere in between the continuum from local and global semiotics.



Figure 5. A name sign indexing the state

According to its linguistic elements the business name *predeti* (‘for children’) is recognizably in Slovak (as the functional text *otvorené* ‘open’ above it). However, the *.sk* domain name is attached to the name as well as some the two words *pre* (‘for’) and *deti* (‘children’) are valorized through different font forms and an image of a smiling face. In other words, linguistically this sign indexes the state, but as an image it follows practices typical for global brands. At the same

time, most of the potential customers speak the dominant local language, Hungarian. This is not reflected in any way in signs indexing the global or the state.

5 A discourse approach

Following J. Blommaert (2013, p. 3), in order to provide a “diagnostic of social, cultural and political structures inscribed in the linguistic landscape”, qualitative distinctions related to the functions of signs in different languages are needed (p. 55). In an attempt to categorize signs from this point of view, the notion of genre was employed by S. Pietikäinen et al. (2011). Their account indicates that the functions of signs often combine with placement, language style, design etc. They (2011, p. 291) have further indicated that the genres are best described by the discourses they relate to. Next I will characterize the discourses over what roles certain languages have in the construction of identities and local naming practices. A typical genre of businesses (and business names) at the Vámbery Square are small enterprises. Following Yurchak (2000) in former Eastern Block countries, the privatization of the small businesses meant also the **personalization** of them. Use of “Western” (i.e. global) business names has been a particularly popular way to achieve this. At the square there are quite many small “feminine” shops and services, such as beauty salons, accessories, clothes shops or florist’s. Typically local women have established such small businesses selling things for other local women. Many of such firms have female personal names as (a part of) the business name, some of the names are Hungarian, some Global, but none Slovak.

According to my fieldwork experience naming practices for children among the Hungarians in Slovakia followed the idea to avoid giving “too Hungarian” names, especially for girls. In one village there was a male Hungarian language activist that had given his son a “neoromantic” name (e.g. *Töhötöm*⁷). Others in the bilingual village said “Poor Töhötöm”. The same activist wanted to give his daughter the 19th century name *Tímea*, however his wife came home from the hospital with a *Laura*. Furthermore, the majority of Hungarian family names are still registered with the Slovak inflection *-ová* for girls even though it has not been compulsory since 1994 (see Misad, 2012). For instance, in a Hungarian school I visited only circa 2 out of 10 of the first grade girls (born after 1994) had a name without the *-ová*. The ideas about naming businesses can be illuminated through an example of a successful female entrepreneur who had bilingual signs in her café. She stated that it is very important for her to use Hungarian as well. However, she had given the café the name *Dolce Vita*, since she found it trendy and nice for a café that sold sweet things.

In the naming practices of small businesses for women, owned by women, we can see thus the need (1) to display personal identity, (2) to be trendy and global, (3) to show commitment to Slovakia, and (4) to be local. All these combine in the namespace of the Vámbery square. Next we analyze different attempts to achieve these goals.

⁷ The names have been changed to protect the identity of the informants.



Figure 6. *Kvetinárstvo Tímea*: A Hungarian name in a Slovak context

Here the 19th century name *Tímea*, appears in the context of the Slovak classifier *Kvetinárstvo* ('florist's'). The classifier is functional in that it tells what is being sold, *Tímea* is symbolic since it indicates a female identity to the business. The sign itself is quite local due to its design, it lacks the characteristics of branding we saw for global business names. The name is very Hungarian, it was first used by a 19th century writer Mór Jókai in his 1872 romantic novel (*Az aranyember*). In brief, the sign in figure 6 is very local as well. It makes evident that the business is run by a local Hungarian, who is committed to living in Slovakia. In the following example, trendiness is displayed through code choice:



Figure 7. A Hungarian name in an adjusted form in a Slovak-Global context

In figure 7, we can explore Hungarian, Slovak and global elements. The most functional, informative element, the classifier *Bižutéria* ('accessories') is in Slovak, the more symbolic and emotional items are in Hungarian and English. The Hungarian name Noémi has been adjusted to the context by dropping the acute from *é*. Such adjustment of Hungarian female names could be seen elsewhere in Slovakia as well. For example, during my fieldwork, I saw *Judit* displayed in a business name in the form of *Judy*. Such forms (*Noemi* and *Judy*) are not used in business names in Hungary and their use would be quite stigmatized as business names in the eyes of Hungarians living in Hungary. Due to the word *fashion* following *Noemi* we might think *Noemi* was considered to be the 'international', thus trendy, form of Noémi. However, Hungarians living in e.g. North America have typically their names changed to *Naomi*, not *Noemi*. In any case, the business name *Noemi Fashion* indicates an effort to display trendiness by the use of a global idiom (Jaworski, 2013). The design of the sign is clearly non-professional, local one. For some of the informants it indicated a cheap and a low quality business. These connotations of the local can be seen as the opposite of the global image: global is expensive, but of high design and quality. A similar observation was made by L. Satinská (2013, p. 97) in relation to restaurants in Bratislava. Finally, in figure 8, we see an alternative way to have the three elements: local, state and global:



Figure 8. An English name with Slovak-Hungarian texts.

In this case the business name is *Poppy*, clearly a global name. The functional texts are in Slovak and Hungarian. Here we can also notice, that the Hungarian form *Bizsutéria* (accessories) is typically used in Hungary in the form of *Bizsu*. That is, *Bizsutéria* is a substandard, local form of Hungarian.

It seems obvious that female names are used to draw attention to female customers (there are no male names on the square). We can conclude, that **Hungarian** names are very likely the names of the entrepreneur, they display **personal identity**, whereas **global** (or globalized) names index a strive for trendiness, and they display **emotion**. Globalized Hungarian names (*Noemi*, *Judy*) are not used in Hungary, they are stigmatized there. In Slovakia, such substandard forms of Hungarian index local Hungarian identity, which is to be kept separate from the more normative Hungarian identity in Hungary.

6. Conclusions

The characteristics, functions and meanings of a linguistic landscape are best charted through a combination of methods. A distributional study provides us a basic account of what languages there are and whether it is a monolingual, bilingual or multilingual scene. Furthermore we can compare this info with surveys, censuses and other similar cities as in our case. The statistical account does not take us far. In order to analyze signs as images, we need to carry out a qualitative semiotic analysis. The local language ideologies reflected in the linguistic landscape can be charted best by the discourse approach. Thus we can ask, what discourses are participated in the research site by those that produce and interpret the signs.

In the investigated site, the Armin Vámbery square in Dunaszerdahely/ Dunajská Streda, name signs are dominated by English and other global languages. Slovak appears often as well, the local spoken vernacular, Hungarian is displayed relatively seldom in commercial signs. On the one hand, local Hungarians have got used to a commercial LL without Hungarian in the socialist period, thus the use of Hungarian in such signs appeared unimportant in interviews with local people. For local Hungarians, signs in Hungarian indexed non-local firms from Hungary. On the other hand, Slovak language laws made the use of Slovak compulsory, with the exception

of business names and global expressions. Hungarian could be used in bilingual signs, however its use is not encouraged in any way by the language laws.

Global semiotics included the use of innovative business names with visual and linguistic features that do not belong to any language as such. There was a tendency to use special visual semiotics for letters and punctuation in global signs, it was somewhat spread to state language signs, too. Typically, the more designed and branded a business name was, the more global it appeared. In contrast to global brands, the semiotics of the investigated “female” signs index localness, cheap products and a non-polished design. Some, at least **emblematic** (cf. Jaffe – Cedric, 2013), use of Hungarian is enough to index the local in Dunaszerdahely. In brief, for local shop owners there was a need to: (1) index a **commitment to Slovakia** through Slovak dominant commercial signs, (2) index **trendiness**, modern and Western values through global names, and (3) index being **local** through some use of Hungarian, including substandard forms, not typical for the namescape in Hungary.

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