

SCALING LINGUISTIC AND SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPES IN BULGARIA'S MOUNTAINS

[Martin HENZELMANN](#)

Ph.D. in Slavic Linguistics

(University of Greifswald, Germany)

martin.henzelmann@uni-greifswald.de

Abstract

In this paper, I outline the perspectives of exploring Linguistic Landscapes (LL) and Semiotic Landscapes (SL) in Bulgaria. I focus on mountainous regions, which have rarely been the subject of linguistic studies. After a brief overview of the core research topics of LL and SL, I present seven approaches to the empirical study of linguistic territorial structures in the mountains of Bulgaria.

Keywords: *Linguistic Landscapes, Semiotic Landscapes, Language Use, Mountains, Bulgaria*

Rezumat

În articol, prezentăm perspectivele explorării „peisajelor” lingvistice (în limba engleză: Linguistic Landscapes, LL) și a „peisajelor semiotice” (în limba engleză: Semiotic Landscapes, SL) în Bulgaria. Ne axăm pe regiunile muntoase, care au făcut rareori obiectul unor studii lingvistice. După o scurtă trecere în revistă a temelor de cercetare de bază ale LL și SL, prezentăm șapte abordări empirice ale structurilor teritoriale lingvistice din munții Bulgaria.

Cuvinte-cheie: *peisaje lingvistice, peisaje semiotice, utilizarea limbii, munți, Bulgaria*

1. Linguistic Landscapes and Semiotic Landscapes

When investigating the linguistic structure in mountainous areas, two promising approaches complement each other. The first of these approaches is Linguistic Landscape (LL). This theory has been questioning the interaction between languages in the public sphere and the reasons for their occurrence for about three decades. Thom Huebner outlines the development of LL and goes into the main milestones of the research (cf. Huebner, 2016, pp. 1-5): Quoting an essay from 1997, Huebner refers to Landry and Bourhis who speak of language in public space as containing sociolinguistic implications. Furthermore, features of language planning and the ethnolinguistic vitality of a community are expressed through public language use. The authors introduce the definition of “Linguistic Landscape”, which they understand by the visible use and salience of languages that exist in public. The focus lies on inscriptions of all kinds in a clearly delineated area. LL is therefore predominantly about written, not spoken language. This is important to mention because spoken language could also be explored in a particular urban or rural space, but the studies on LL rarely do so.

As objects and actors in the study of LL, Huebner traces a development that draws ever wider circles and expands the object of investigation. Researchers are not only interested in inscriptions on street signs, squares,

buildings, or advertisements, but also include language on graffiti or postcards in their portfolio. In addition, not only static but also dynamic objects, such as neon signs, are highlighted. A strong focus lies on signs provided by the environment, such as sounds, colours, or architecture, which are not primarily of a linguistic nature. These semiotic signs, however, tend to motivate the subject matter of Semiotic Landscapes, which I will discuss a little further on. In LL, studies on bi- and multilingualism are much more frequent instead. They examine, for example, which languages occur in a concrete area, which language is dominant, and what power relations result therefrom.

The disciplinary and theoretical perspectives in LL are relatively broad and encompass multiple approaches. Huebner refers to various sources in which, for instance, historical inscriptions are examined concerning their concrete content, the circumstances of their origin and their symbolic meaning. At the same time, he speaks of overwhelming dominance in the study of the quantitative distribution of languages. Quantitative methods are applied to order the hierarchy and significance of a language, e.g., in a city, with hard facts. However, LL is suitable for combining multimodal approaches, as there is no strict set procedure for the research.

Regarding methodologies and themes, Huebner points out that the first “studies were heavily quantitative” (Huebner, 2016, p. 5), but we should not assume that incidents were simply counted. Rather, quantification also enables contextualised research that broadens the view of public language presence. There are also qualitative approaches in which, for example, interviews (and thus also spoken language) are included. Recently, more and more digital formats have played a role in data analysis, such as global positioning systems, videos, and audio data, virtual tours, Google Earth and Google Maps. In sum, Huebner concludes: “Investigations in LL document the relationship between language and, among other things, power, contestation, and negotiation of rights and ownership; multilingualism and individual identity construction; language awareness and language attitudes; local language and national identity; language and religion; government language policy versus language practice; minority language suppression or maintenance or revival; tourism and the commodification of culture; etc. One area of rapidly growing research interest is the intersection of LL and education, in particular language teaching and learning” (Huebner, 2016, p. 5).

What is striking throughout the research tradition is that in practice, most of the geographically described areas are cities. Academic studies are very much focused on dealing with metropolises (e.g., Backhaus, 2007), where a multitude of material can be collected. Rural regions, in contrast, are hardly highlighted, which may have different reasons. Villages or scattered settlements provide far less material than cities, as there are significantly fewer inscriptions available in public space. There, we find some street names, signposts, buildings, churches, cemeteries, or squares, to name but a few examples with text in public. In mountainous regions, the data situation

is even worse, as most of the inscriptions are omitted apart from signposts, manual inscriptions, or certain information boards for tourists and some other examples, and also the variation of the occurring texts is much lower than in cities. Mountainous regions are much more difficult to access than cities, often have to be roamed on foot, and overall do not provide a good base for quantitative approaches (Henzelmann, 2021, p. 32). Therefore, the study of LL in the mountains faces some practical obstacles.

Closely related to LL is the study of Semiotic Landscapes (SL), as Adam Jaworski and Crispin Thurlow emphasise the interaction of different modalities in written discourse. For the authors, the system of language is only one (albeit extremely important) element in the construction and interpretation of places or spaces. Potentially, they consider all landscapes semiotic, highlighting that landscape meaning is always constructed by socio-cultural interpretation (Jaworski/Thurlow, 2010, p. 2). In the broadest sense, this means an extension of LL, since the role of language is not foregrounded in the construction of space, but rather the overall impression of space or a place. Any quantitative approach is not the primary aim of SL, but rather the semiotic content of certain linguistic expressions in public is important and needs to be considered with parameters such as visual impression, colours, shapes, sizes, and other factors. In SL, objects without the use of language are to be included in the analysis (e.g., artificially created items). Furthermore, the perception of the physical environment such as nature and territory plays an important role in aesthetic assessments, but also in memory culture, historical discourses, politics, or ethnicity (Jaworski/Thurlow, 2010, p. 3; for other basic insights of semiotics cf. Bentele/Bystrina, 1978; Mantchev, 1998; Миленкова-Киен/Milenkova-Kien, 1999; Machado, 2013). These aspects are suitable to shed light on the SL of mountain landscapes. Even a small scale of language use can make the environment of a text semiotically significant, as even Ferdinand de Saussure had explained: “La langue est un système de signes exprimant des idées, et par là, comparable à l’écriture, ... aux rites symboliques. ... Elle est seulement le plus important de ces systèmes. ... La linguistique n’est qu’une partie de cette science générale, les lois que découvrira la sémiologie seront applicables à la linguistique, et celle-ci se trouvera ainsi rattachée à un domaine bien défini dans l’ensemble des faits humains” (Saussure, 1984, p. 33).

In practice, we see numerous overlaps between the theoretical approaches in LL and SL, with slightly different emphases. While LL and SL both evaluate visual impressions in addition to inscriptions, it is obvious that LL is more concerned with the question of how frequently a language occurs in a particular place, what significance this has for that place, and what this means in a broader context (cf. Гладкова & Ликоманова/Gladkova & Likomanova, 2008, pp. 53-54). For instance, the use of bilingual place-name signs is evaluated in the context of a country’s language policy, multilingual inscriptions on shops are studied against the background of a state’s migration or language policy, and observed font sizes or positioning of languages above

or below other languages are evaluated in a hierarchical sense (cf., e.g., Backhaus, 2007; Ben-Rafael, 2009; and many more). Due to existing multiple approaches, however, these are only some of the procedures that are conceivable within the framework of LL. In contrast, SL is rather focused on capturing the overall impression of a concrete static situation. In principle, there are no constraints that could not be included in the interpretation of SL, whereby language use is not as much in the foreground as in the LL. Increasingly, quantitative surveys do not seem to have aroused much interest in SL research so far, as a quantitative statement obviously cannot always contribute to the description of the semiotisation of a concrete fixed point or a two-dimensional spatial structure. Therefore, what is described in SL are mainly snapshots that result from the sum of visual or auditory impressions.

Both LL and SL offer an important basis for the study of language in public spaces and in mountain regions. The latter topic has so far only very rarely been the subject of research but is nevertheless suitable for a multifaceted description of the linguistic structure in mountain regions. In the following, I will therefore describe some options to study LL and SL in Bulgarian mountain regions.

2. Exploring the Scenery

In this session, I will show what has to be done when studying LL and SL in the mountains of Bulgaria. I will point out what needs to be elaborated in the analysis, what challenges the researcher should consider, and what perspectives the study of LL and SL offers in the mountains, particularly in Bulgaria.

In many parts of Bulgaria, we find mountain ranges. These include the Balkan Mountains (bulg. *Стара планина*), the Strandzha Mountains, the Rhodopes, Pirin, Rila, and others. Mount Musala in the Rila Mountains, with an altitude of 2925 metres, is the highest peak in the country and on the Balkan Peninsula (on the country's natural and cultural landscapes cf. Grunewald & Stoilov, 1998; Kahl, 2019). The map below highlights that mountain landscapes are particularly prevalent in southwestern and central Bulgaria.



Figure 1: *Topographic Map of Bulgaria. Source: Wikimedia Commons*

This background serves to give us an overview, as in the following we will examine how to study the interactions of language and public space in mountain regions in Bulgaria. To do so, we will employ two examples (cf. Figure 2 and 3), and refer to the theoretical findings provided by the theories of LL and SL. We will outline which tasks a scholar is faced with when examining LL and SL in Bulgaria's mountains, and we propose seven steps to consider for a robust empirical analysis.



Figure 2: A signboard in the Pirin National Park. Photo by the author.



Figure 3: A sign in the Rila Monastery Nature Park. Photo by the author.

2.1. Examining Languages

In the context of the LL, it is of fundamental importance to document and examine the languages that occur. Thus, the first empirical task for a scholar is to observe which languages appear in the public sphere to communicate information. To a certain extent, this is followed by the question of why the corresponding languages occur or why other languages are absent elsewhere. The languages used in the public sphere fulfil concrete tasks.

We can assume that in mountain regions in Bulgaria, all important indications are given in the national language, Bulgarian. This ensures that they are understood by the local population. In principle, this is a matter of course, but what is not a matter of course is additional indications in a foreign language. In the vast majority of cases, English is the language used on multilingual boards. Other languages are much less frequent or not at all present, which may have several reasons (e.g., the expectation that a foreign tourist knows English anyway and therefore no further foreign language is necessary).

The employment of one language only (in this case Bulgarian) or of two languages (e.g., Bulgarian and additionally English, cf. Figure 2) plays a role in natural areas when important contents are relevant for all visitors and

need to be communicated. This concerns, for instance, access restrictions, prohibitions or rules of conduct that are expected of tourists. Topographic proper names, on the other hand, are not translated as long as there is no foreign-language equivalent (cf. Figure 3). Instead, there are sometimes transliterations according to a standard that in most cases is based on an English-oriented digraph system.

In practice, one will observe that in the mountainous regions of Bulgaria, there is either Bulgarian monolingualism, which in many cases is at least provided with a transliteration, or there is also an English translation. Other languages will be found extremely rarely (in contrast to multilingual urban centres).

2.2. Evaluating Inscriptions on Boards

The second task for a scholar is to evaluate inscriptions in public space, and there are at least two basic focal points for analysis. The first focal point is content-oriented, analysing, above all, the word choice, grammar, and semantics. This analysis is about essential linguistic issues, the discussion of which helps to describe the linguistic conception of inscriptions. In practice, different constellations are conceivable, for instance, one will observe signs that contain only a single word, such as the name of a place or a warning, and others with complex texts on information boards (cf. Figure 2). Here, LL serves to examine which language is embedded in a concrete geographical setting, and it is important to note that there are many iconic signs on which no text is used, too. The latter can be discussed against a background provided by the theory of SL.

The second focal point is a visually oriented focus. It includes the investigation of the given font, the use of upper and lower case letters, font sizes and writing systems (cf. Станишић/Stanišić, 2019). For Bulgarian, this means the standard use of the Cyrillic script, while any translations or transliterations occur in Latin script. This involves important semiotic implications, such as the existence of capital letters for particular emphasis. Moreover, the meaning of presented facts can also be made by colour coding.

2.3. Studying the Colour Composition

A third empirical step for the researcher is to assume that the colour composition of signs and texts in public spaces is not carried out arbitrarily. Instead, certain preferences need to be examined. In particular, this may be demonstrated in the presence of language and other signs in Bulgarian mountain landscapes, as there is a high degree of harmonisation with nature narratives.

As early as in the 1960s, colour semiotics was implemented as an important subject of investigation, the main findings of which are summarised in a paper by Peter Hill (cf. Hill, 2008). In the introduction, he refers to the studies presented by Berlin and Kay who show that languages have a

consortium of colour universals. This in turn is accompanied by the designation of eleven basic colours that occur in a certain order. While black and white are the most common, they are followed by red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and grey (Hill, 2008, p. 64). Basic colour terms are characterised by the fact that their meaning does not emerge from their actual components and must therefore be evoked by other circumstances.

When we consider these colours in the context of mountain regions, it is important to remember that we are in natural ecological systems. This means that a universal order of colours in natural areas must be modified and adapted to local conditions. Natural colours dominate in the discourse, with green clearly being the one that most strongly evokes a nature narrative (cf. Калита и Начева-Марванова/Kalita & Načeva-Marvanova, 2021). Other colours are also very important in the nature of Bulgaria, for instance, brown is the colour of trees, grey is the colour of stones, and white and yellow are the colours of some flowers. Among those colours mentioned by Hill, orange, purple and pink are the ones that can be identified only from some plants, all other examples are likely to invoke nature narratives more often.

When examining how language in public nature space is designed on a signboard, it is essential to consider the colour composition of any signs on it. While inscriptions in black or white letters are very common (cf. Figure 2), they occur much less frequently in other colours, such as purple or orange. In addition, shades of green or brown are very often applied to harmonise an inscription and its environment (cf. Figure 3).

In sum, attention should be paid to which colours are visible in mountain areas and how they are combined with linguistic components. The overall impression that can be gained from this context is well suited as a basis for studies on SL and can provide information on how the production of space functions in nature areas. However, this is not limited to the targeted use of colour, the material must also be carefully considered.

2.4. Exploring the Material

In connection with the employment of language and colours, the fourth task for a scholar is to consider the material of signs. Essentially, it can be found that information boards or signposts are made of different materials. A very robust material is metal. Therefore, it is not surprising that many relevant signposts are made of metal, primarily for practical reasons. In other cases, aesthetic reasons explain the use of material, especially when wood is utilised. Wooden boards suggest a direct connection with the surrounding nature, in particular with the forests. Wood is a natural material that is, e.g., suitable for the labelling of tourist objects (cf. Figure 3) and thus embodies a special closeness to a concrete geographical structure. It is also conceivable to use stone in certain places, for example, to form sculptures or to highlight important events that have taken place. Stone stands for firm groundedness and immutability. Thus, when exploring nature spaces, it needs to be analysed whether commemorative plaques made of stone (or sometimes metal) are found and thus enhance the historiographical significance of a given space.

2.5. Categorising the Illustrations

Besides the text, the material of a board and its colours, the fifth task for a researcher is to identify other visual impressions which complement an inscription. These are very often illustrations, which we can separate into simple and complex ones. Simple illustrations are, for instance, directional arrows or pictograms. They do not contain any text but serve as iconic signs. Their existence makes it easier for the visitor to follow certain instructions or hints without having to resort to extensive explanations. It is different with complex illustrations, which provide much more detailed information for the visitor. Maps, for example, illustrate the topographical nature of space in addition to a text (cf. Figure 2), or one can also detect other illustrations, such as photos of plants and animals. This gives the tourist a realistic impression of what to expect on site.

2.6. Considering the Status of the Object

Since there are different nature conservation regions in Bulgaria, the sixth task for a scholar is to question the legal status of the area to be investigated. The legal status always arises when doing research on LL or SL in a mountain range because it might be a particularly protected area (cf. Figure 2 and 3). This is important for any analysis because it can result in restrictions on the accessibility of the respective area. Furthermore, it is to be expected that strict protection and associated access possibilities will also mean that different inscriptions might characterise the local public space. Thus, in a very busy tourist area such as the Pirin National Park (cf. Figure 2), it is to be expected that there will be numerous instructions for tourists, at least at certain points, while in less accessible areas very strict access rules apply. In such areas, such as are Nature Reserves in Bulgaria, it is possible to encounter less tourist information and instead more warning or prohibition signs.

The documentation of languages, signs and legal facts will reveal important information about the LL and the SL in mountainous regions. The same is valid for the inclusion of other perceptions, which are very diverse and individual.

2.7. Gathering further Perceptions

In addition to the aspects described above, an empirical researcher may find other perceptions that influence his interpretation of the space, the languages found in it and the perception of individual places. Hence, we need to distinguish between acoustic and visual impressions. Acoustic impressions in mountain landscapes are, for instance, the rustling of the leaves or the singing of the birds. Visual impressions can be categorised as static and dynamic ones. As far as static visual impressions are concerned, these can be occurrences in nature itself, such as the forest, stones, paths, woods or plants (cf. Figure 3). It may also be purposefully constructed objects, such as mountain huts or small restaurants, which in turn contrast

with the infrastructure in a city, where one shop is next to another. Dynamic impressions are, in contrast, other people who move around, animals or means of transport, but also the sun or the rain. The latter has a very different meaning for the hiker in the mountains than for someone in the city, as it may decide whether he can cover his distance or whether he has to wait for the rain to pass. This circumstance could be considered as an object for SL analysis.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented that mountainous regions play an important role in the topography of Bulgaria and can therefore be considered an important object for the study of LL and SL. In this context, I have shown which concrete objects of investigation are offered in mountainous landscapes in Bulgaria, and I have outlined which empirical tasks a scholar has to deal with if he opts to evaluate LL and SL in Bulgaria's mountains. However, the findings do not claim to be exhaustive, because it is quite conceivable that one can combine further perceptions with linguistic or semiotic components and thus generate new approaches for interpretation. In other words, additional findings not described in this paper can be embedded in the analysis, too. They are up to the interpretation of the researcher and could cover, for instance, the fresh aroma of the forest or animal sounds. It is important to bundle all impressions and put them in relation to the use of language and the concrete geographical space when contributing to the description of LL or SL in a concrete area.

Bulgaria in particular offers excellent conditions for investigating LL and SL in mountain structures, as numerous hiking routes form a well-developed infrastructure for the researcher. Studies in the field of LL and SL will therefore be an important contribution to the research of language in public space in Bulgaria. This is significant because mountain regions have often been neglected in the research of LL and SL so far.

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