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LINGUISTIC LANDSCPAE OF TBILISI: A CASE STUDY OF GRAFFITI

The article investigates graffiti of Tbilisi, Georgia, as a part of the linguistic landscape of the city. The research is carried out within the theoretical framework of linguistic landscape, based on the works by Landry and Bourhis (1997), Gorter (2006), Jaworski and Thurlow (2010), etc. The aspects of multimodality, multilingualism and sociality are focused on in the research. The graffiti analysed displays the features of multimodality where visual images are used alongside with written texts, thus, adding the element of complexity to the discourse investigated. It must be pointed out that the use of English language for graffiti making prevails. Regarding the social aspect of the linguistic landscape, Tbilisi graffiti shows the engagement of street artists in a socially-relevant discussion tackling both local and state-level problems. The display of Tbilisi graffiti demonstrates the fluidity of this type of narrative: older graffiti are covered with new ones in addition to being cleaned or covered with official or commercial signage.

KEY WORDS: *linguistic landscape, graffiti, street art, Tbilisi, Georgia.*

Introduction

Graffiti has become an object of interest in recent investigations within the field of linguistic landscape, mainly inspired by the article of Alastair Pennycook “Spatial Narrations: Graffscapes and City Souls” (2010), which discusses the graffiti of Melbourne, Australia. The growing interest in graffiti both de-villainises the phenomenon, which has long been categorised as a form of crime rather than art, and establishes it as a means of communication within the linguistic landscape of the modern city. The multimodal and multilingual nature of graffiti challenges researchers in the field, for despite the complexity of the phenomenon there is little context which could provide the basis for interpretation, except for the location of graffiti. In addition, its recent bad reputation causes many street artists to hide their identity under mysterious tags which usually consist of letters rather than names of graffiti makers, thus not allowing to establish consistency with regard to themes and style in the works of a particular street artist. However, the challenges do not diminish the role

graffiti plays in the formation of urban linguistic landscape; on the contrary, the anonymity of street artists allows the freedom of expression and provides the means to do that. This article investigates the graffiti of Tbilisi, Georgia, as a part of the linguistic landscape of the city. It aims at researching the graffiti which is accessible to a foreigner with the focus on the historical conditions determining linguistic forms of street art in Tbilisi and topics relevant for the graffiti makers of the city. The aspect of readability is of importance here, for the Georgian language has its own script, distinctly different from the Latin script, which makes a big part of graffiti in Georgia inaccessible for those who are not familiar with it. The research is carried out within the theoretical framework of linguistic landscape, based on the works by Landry and Bourhis (1997), Gorter (2006), Jaworski and Thurlow (2010), etc. The database of 60 samples of graffiti was collected in Tbilisi, in June 2015, the focus areas included the central streets of Tbilisi such as the street of Shota Rustaveli as well as the Old Town.

Graffiti as an integral part of the theory of linguistic landscape

The theory of linguistic landscape is an approach to the linguistic environment of the contemporary city, exploring its multilingualism and the reasons behind it. By a classical definition proposed by Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25), “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration”. The definition of the term has been evolving since as a result of contributions by Gorter (2006), Jaworski, Thurlow (2010), Scollon, Scollon (2003), just to mention a few.

Durk Gorter (2006: 1) introduces a social aspect of linguistic signs, asserting that “linguistic landscape refers to the social context in which more than one language is present”. The key words to describe the approach are social context and multilingualism, while the object of research is not limited as in the previous definition. Shohamy and Waksman (2012: 110) point out the fluid nature of linguistic landscape, stating that “the public space then is not a static arena but rather a dynamic and fluid space, constantly being constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed”. Thus, the social nature of linguistic landscape, the multilingualism and fluidity of the narrative that signs of linguistic landscape produce could be considered an important addition to the definition of the term.

The complexity of the signs constituting linguistic landscape has led to their classifications. In this research the classification proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2003) will be used. It distinguishes four types of discourses within the linguistic landscape: regulatory, infrastructural, commercial and transgressive. Regulatory and infrastructural discourses are produced by official bodies, commercial is business related, while transgressive discourse includes the signs that disrupt the official discourse. Backhaus (2007) describes graffiti as a prominent instance of this type of discourse.

The function of an unsanctioned discourse as a part of a linguistic landscape is important for the understanding of the overall linguistic narrative of an urban environment. As Helot

et al. (2012: 18) describe, “bottom-up reactions of the members of the local community who use their languages in all their diversity and creativity to express their identity, their resistance to dominant discourse and who even find new ways of expressing dissent”. The elements of novelty and creativity rather than enforcement and manipulation distinguish the narratives which compose the transgressive discourse, including graffiti.

Graffiti is often considered a form of art, however, the significance of the social aspect should not be overlooked with the reference to this type of narrative, too. As Toby Eyck (2016: 219) points out, graffiti “is part of the community and the rituals that are tied to it will be symbolic of the solidarity of various vested interests”. The idea of the social function of graffiti is elaborated by A. Pennycook (2010) as well:

from risk taking to opposition to bourgeois sensibilities, from marking parts of the city to developing a recognisable style, from placing pieces in juxtaposition to officially sanctioned signage (commercial advertising, road signs and so on), to location oneself within a particular spatial, class and ethnic sub-culture of the city, graffiti are about establishing particular types of identity (Pennycook 2010: 142).

A. Pennycook’s definition of the functions of graffiti within the framework of linguistic landscape not only highlights the aspects of social functions such as creation of identity and resistance to existing official discourses, but also marks the complexity of graffiti which incorporates the aspect of art.

Graffiti as an object of research with the view to linguistic landscape poses a certain level of difficulty for it is a product of an interplay between the language and the visual discourse. In *Semiotic Landscapes: Language, Image, Space*, Jaworski and Thurlow (2010: 2) suggest that linguistic landscape should investigate “other discursive modalities: visual images, non-verbal communication, architecture and the built environment” as a separate branch such as semiotic landscape. The reason behind the inclusion is the function of urban semiotic signs. According to the authors, these signs are “made through deliberate human intervention and meaning making” (Jaworski, Thurlow 2010: 2). Thus, even if visual signs are not always related to spoken or written language they perform the same function, i.e. the function of communicating a message to the urban community and interacting with it.

Jaworski and Thurlow do not discuss the phenomenon of graffiti in particular; however, the ideas of other theorists discussing the phenomenon of graffiti and its functions fit in with their ideas on a semiotic sign. Scollon and Scollon (2003) propose that signs such as graffiti all interact with one another, with the spaces they are in, and with the social actors of these spaces, thus, creating networks of meaning, or ‘semiotic aggregates’. A similar idea is expressed by Martin Irvine (2012: 235) who asserts that street art is “a community practice with its own learned codes, rules, hierarchies of prestige, and means of communication”. Irvine also elaborates on the functions of street art and suggests that “a street work can be an intervention, a collaboration, a commentary, a dialogic critique, an individual or collective manifesto, an assertion of existence, aesthetic therapy for the dysaesthetics of urban controlled, commercialised visibility” (Irvine 2012: 238). In general, it can be stated

that graffiti is assigned a communicative function and is typical of an urban environment which presumes it is an integral part of a linguistic landscape.

In addition to the communicative function, another feature of an object of the research within the theoretical framework of linguistic landscape is multilingualism. Regarding the object of analysis of this article, a characteristic feature of graffiti in Tbilisi is the use of multiple languages by street artists. The languages most often used in Tbilisi graffiti include Georgian and English. Despite the fact that the older generation of the city inhabitants prefers Russian over English, and, consequently, Russian is more often heard in a spoken discourse related to intercultural communication, English is preferred by the younger generation, which is mainly the group that creates street art.

This preference coincides with the official language policy of the country, for government imposed rules require to duplicate signs in the English language instead of Russian. The rule is observed in public institutions; a similar trend is noticed in street art, which is a bottom-up signage in contrast to top-down signs regulated by official institutions.

Historical background

To provide some background information about the object of the research, information about the recent history of Georgia will be presented. Tbilisi is the capital of Georgia, a post-Soviet country whose tumultuous recent history has had a major impact on street art among other elements of the linguistic landscape of the city. The country became an independent state in 1991 as a result of the referendum where the majority of inhabitants of the country supported the idea of the country's secession from the USSR. The process of becoming an independent state was a complicated one: the year 1991 witnessed the beginning of a civil war in the country resulting in dramatical changes of political situation over the last few decades; however, the focus on the partnership with the EU and the USA has stayed a common denominator among Georgian politicians since 2003 when Mikheil Saakashvili became the president of Georgia (Government of Georgia 2017).

The unstable recent history of Georgia, dominated by uprisings and other forms of civil unrest, has transformed the country's social map. Following the social unrest, the country has witnessed a massive emigration of its population, especially ethnic minorities (according to the data of Migration Policy Centre as of March 2013) (Migration Policy Centre 2013). Georgian society also faces issues related to the discrimination of different minority groups including LGBT persons, representatives of other ethnic and religious minorities. The report of the EU Commission against Racism and Intolerance (published on 1 March 2016) indicates that though a number of laws against the discrimination of minorities have been introduced by the Georgian government, the cases of hate speech and assaults of people who belong to minority groups prove that the responses by the Georgian authorities to such cases are inadequate. These social changes which the society of Georgia has been subjected to in its recent history have had an impact on the linguistic landscape of its capital Tbilisi, namely the graffiti of the city that will be analysed in this article.

Graffiti in Tbilisi

The research of Tbilisi graffiti was carried out in the central parts of the city where political and educational institutions are located, including the following streets: M. Kostava, I. Chavchavadze, I. Abashidze, Sh. Rustaveli, P. Melikishvili and smaller neighbouring streets. The term ‘graffiti’ encompasses a variety of visual and textual works including tags, paintings and texts. The scope of this research includes all three types of texts, in terms of language, only tags in the Latin alphabet and English texts are discussed in more detail. Considering the fact that the Georgian language has its own distinct alphabet, the focus on the Latin alphabet is an important fact to mention.

To start with, tags in the Latin alphabet will be discussed in more detail. The research focused on the central streets of Tbilisi, which can be considered prestigious places to display graffiti by street artists. The importance of such locations is determined by a better level of visibility the works receive and the higher level of danger, for graffiti is not officially approved. The works of street art are made under a threat of being caught by the police in general, and a possibility of such a threat is higher in the central part of the city. A tag or a signature of a street artist can be sprayed separately or alongside a graffiti. Tbilisi graffiti in the Latin alphabet includes both types. Regarding the nature of tags, it must be pointed out that they include Georgian words spelled in Latin letters as well as English words/phrases used as tags:



Figure 1



Figure 2

The tag in Figure 1 is the name of an acknowledged Georgian artist who started as a street artist but is currently collaborating with art galleries and displaying his works there. The tag in Figure 2 is the name of a crew of Georgian street artists. What is important to mention, the tag in Figure 1 reveals the authorship of the street artist although the painting itself is not produced under the permission of city authorities, which presumes that the role of formal authorities in the city is undermined to a certain extent as the illegal nature of graffiti does not imply city authorities will be taking action against its authors. In this instance, the case of the painting could be seen as a way to market a certain author by

adding an aspect of ‘coolness’ to his works. Thus, depending on the conditions that graffiti is produced, in the case of Tbilisi, due to the lack of restrictions from city authorities, graffiti can become a part of the commercial rather than transgressive discourse. The tag in Figure 2, however, implies anonymity of the crew that sprayed it as well as an attempt to preserve the authenticity of street art which is non-confirmation to official rules and regulations and anonymity of its authors.

Texts in public places serve a number of functions. For street art, the main functions include self-promotion (tags) and a dialogue with the society about the issues that are considered to be important by the artist. The graffiti on Tbilisi streets embraces a variety of topics. One of the most fashionable topics – an ecological lifestyle – is reflected in the example of graffiti ‘Go Vegan’, which is sprayed in multiple locations in Shota Rustaveli street (Fig. 3). The stencil is sprayed in the places of high-visibility: on the walls next to street markets or on lamp poles. It is of humorous nature, depicting a rabbit eating a carrot, which assumes a peaceful position of the artist to share the point of view rather than assert. The black colour selected by the artist stands out on a white wall, but does not appear to be threatening due to a small scale of the stencil.

Another important issue is asserting the position of graffiti artists by claiming the credibility of street art (Fig. 4).



Figure 3



Figure 4

This graffiti differs from the one discussed previously: it is painted in an underground crossing under Shota Rustaveli street; the black colour and the size of the font make it visible and assertive in terms of the content of the message. The text itself is quite straightforward; the font does not strike the passer-by as particularly artistic, for it is quite simplistic. However, the graffiti addresses the issue of the legitimization of graffiti and its inclusion into the realm of art, which is a relevant question for the global graffiti makers’ community in general. Thus, it places Georgian graffiti within the global community of street artists, establishing common points of reference.

Along with general-public directed messages, Tbilisi graffiti also includes a number of texts which express personal/emotional content: messages addressed to real/imaginary

lovers (Fig. 5) or an interest in art (Fig. 6), the latter are more typical of graffiti sprayed in the areas close to local universities.



Figure 5

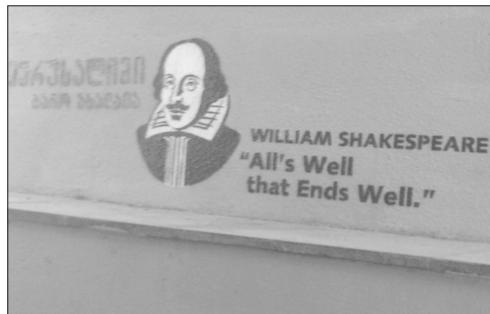


Figure 6

The graffiti in Figure 6 is not only a reference to personal emotions, it is also a reference to the famous Pink Floyd song “Wish You Were Here”, which addresses the problems of conformity and personal choice. Overall, Pink Floyd has become a symbol of resistance of the post-Soviet era after their famous “The Wall” was performed to commemorate the fall of the Berlin Wall. In contrast to other Pink Floyd songs such as “Another Brick in the Wall” and “The Wall”, “Wish You Were Here” is a more lyrical song which dwells on personal themes within a social context.

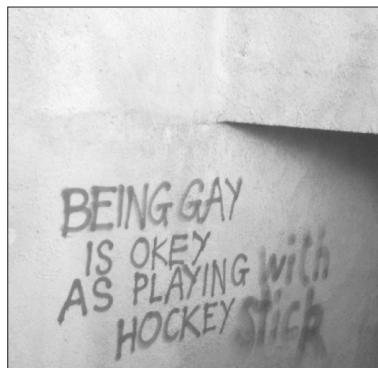


Figure 7



Figure 8

The graffiti in Figure 7 was discovered in the area near a local university, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. It is just one of many examples of classical arts-related graffiti in an underground crossing near the Faculty of Philology. The image of William Shakespeare is sprayed multiple times in the same location alongside with George Gershwin’s. These are cultural references to the Anglo-Saxon culture, which has recently replaced the Russian culture in the field of references in Georgia as a result of political conflicts between Georgia and the Russian Federation. Although both English philology and Russian philology are taught within the walking distance from the underground crossing, there were no graffiti referencing the Russian culture in the area. What is also important to mention in this context is that although Russian is the language spoken by a big part

of the Georgian population in Tbilisi, there are no graffiti in the Russian language, which signifies the change of the status of the Russian language which is being replaced by the English language, at least among the younger generation of local inhabitants.

In addition to the topic of art, local graffiti also tackles political and social issues in the form of a dialogue with a passer-by as well as a dialogue between street artists. As Georgia is a post-Soviet country, issues such as LGBT persons' rights, racism and integration of foreigners are considered to be important and are addressed by street artists.

Figure 7 presents an individual statement, expressing the artist's position on the equal rights of LGBT people as well as a commentary by another graffiti maker expressing an opposite opinion – the difference of authorship is clear in the difference of font, which is an important element in distinguishing oneself as a street artist. Figure 8 also introduces a dialogue between two street artists: the statement 'Georgia for Georgians' has been painted over not by public authorities, but by another street artist. Both pieces of graffiti were found in underground crossings in the area further from the centre, nearby the local zoological park. The questions addressed in both pieces are relevant in Georgia as a post-Soviet society where the discrimination of other nationalities and sexual minorities is high in comparison to Western European countries, as discussed earlier in the article. The discussion which takes place on the walls reflects the discussion within the society; however, it must be noted that the graffiti of this kind in Tbilisi expresses discussion rather than statements of discrimination. Apparently, this generation of graffiti makers in Tbilisi relates to Western values more than to the existing prejudices in the society, which points out to Western European-bound inclinations of the local youth.

In addition to social issues of the state level, street art addresses local social problems, pointing out the areas that raise concern. One of the examples of such a statement is the following piece of graffiti in one of underground crossings in Tbilisi:



Figure 9

The artwork starts a dialogue between the artist and a passer-by by attracting attention of the latter to a social issue – the lack of cleanliness in the underground crossing. A specific feature of Tbilisi underground crossings is that many of them are used for utilitarian purposes as market places for street vendors. Consequently, the majority of underground crossings in the centre of the city are quite tidy and safe. However, underground crossings located further

from the city centre are in poor condition, which is pointed out in the piece of graffiti in Figure 9. The dialogical form of the piece reveals the communal nature of the message: though very simple in its form, it expresses the graffiti maker's concern about the well-being of the fellow inhabitants of the area.

Dialogues of this kind occur on the walls in public places not only between the artist and general public, but also between street artists themselves. Certain areas are so densely covered in graffiti that street artists spray their new works on already existing graffiti. An interesting case of a dialogue between two street artists could be the graffiti in Figure 10.



Figure 10



Figure 11

In Figure 10 there is a fragment of graffiti painted by Georgian street artists, which is sprayed on another graffiti by an Italian street artist. The works of the latter stand out among other graffiti on Tbilisi streets because his works are the only ones written in Italian (Fig. 11). It must be noted that street artists show respect for other people's art work in the streets, which can be illustrated with the example shown in Figure 10, where there is a graffiti containing an apology to the Italian graffiti maker for spraying a new piece of graffiti over his work. Overall, concerning the street etiquette of graffiti makers in Tbilisi, it must be noted that respect of other people's work and the needs of the local community is a key element describing how walls and local environment are treated by local street artists.

Graffiti which is related to the English language does not function in isolation in Tbilisi streets. There are some examples of graffiti where English words are incorporated in a Georgian text (Fig. 12); there are also visual references to English culture which do not contain any linguistic material, but feature images which are easily recognisable (Fig. 13):



Figure 12



Figure 13

Figure 13 portrays Mickey Mouse and Mini without an ironic context, such pieces of graffiti are not abundant.

Visual graffiti which does not contain linguistic elements but is still readable by foreigners provides a critical perspective on political issues using recognisable images which do not require explanation in written form (Figure 14). References to Stalin, a former leader of the USSR, are quite frequent in Tbilisi graffiti, and in all instances found the political figure is portrayed in an ironic context. The official position existing in Georgia regarding the life and work of Stalin is questionable, though. The museum dedicated to the atrocities of Soviet times is located in Tbilisi (Museum of Soviet Occupation), however, in the city nearby called Gori, there is a museum dedicated to the life of Stalin where his life is shown in a positive light (The Joseph Stalin Museum). Graffiti makers of Tbilisi appear to have a clearly negative point of view towards Stalin, for in all examples of graffiti found in Tbilisi Stalin is presented in an ironic light.

Another feature of Tbilisi graffiti is an inclusion of official graffiti into the general discourse of art. Due to an increasing interest in street art, Tbilisi art scene has produced officially approved graffiti (Figure 15).



Figure 14



Figure 15

Figure 15 displays a mural produced in Tbilisi as a result of ArtAttack Festival 2015, which was a collaborative action between artists of Lublin (Poland) and Tbilisi. The festival featured prominent street artists from both countries who produced a number of art installations, murals and workshops for general public during the event. Tbilisi is not an isolated case in Georgia where street art is gaining a formal recognition. Batumi, a resort by the Black sea, has a great number of new murals done by invited street artists from Georgia and other countries.

Conclusions

In summary, the case study of graffiti explores one of the bottom-up elements of the linguistic landscape of Tbilisi (Georgia). The graffiti analysed displays the features of multimodality where visual images are used alongside with written texts, thus, adding the element of complexity to the discourse investigated. As the scope of the analysed material

only included graffiti containing symbols of the Latin alphabet and images recognisable for an outsider of the local culture, it must be pointed out that the use of English language for graffiti making prevails, for only one instance of another language (Italian) was identified. Regarding the social aspect of the linguistic landscape, multiple instances of Tbilisi graffiti show the engagement of street artists in the socially-relevant discussion tackling both local and state-level problems. The display of Tbilisi graffiti demonstrates the fluidity of this type of narrative: older graffiti is covered with new in addition to being cleaned or covered with official or commercial signage. The art aspect of graffiti is becoming more widely recognised: events such as ArtAttack Festival 2015 which introduce street artists' collaborations at an international level strengthen the position of graffiti as a form of art rather than an act of vandalism.

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