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Beyond the signs: multimodal approaches in analysing multilingual landscapes in Transcarpathia (Ukraine)¹

1. Introduction

Transcarpathia is a historically and ethnolinguistically complex region in western Ukraine, shaped by a series of geopolitical transformations over the past century. Formerly part of the Kingdom of Hungary within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the region became a separate administrative unit following the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, and has since belonged to multiple states, including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Soviet Union, and, since 1991, independent Ukraine (Csernicskó et al., 2023).

These shifting political borders have profoundly influenced the status and vitality of the Hungarian language and community in the region. Hungarians constitute the largest minority group in Transcarpathia and are primarily concentrated in settlements near the Hungarian border. According to census data, over 95% of ethnic Hungarians and 98% of native Hungarian speakers in Ukraine live in Transcarpathia (Molnár–Molnár D., 2005).

Although the post-independence period initially permitted the expansion of Hungarian-language education and cultural institutions, recent legislative developments — particularly the 2017 Law on Education and the 2019 State Language Law — have restricted the public and educational use of minority languages, raising concerns about linguistic assimilation and the erosion of language rights (Csernicskó et al., 2020). There are ongoing and rapid changes in the country's language policy that affect the everyday lives of the minority communities.

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Despite these constraints, the Hungarian community maintains a distinct identity through institutions, a network of Hungarian-medium schools, advocacy organisations, church-based community life. However, emigration trends and shrinking opportunities for Hungarian-language use in public life pose ongoing challenges to the long-term preservation of the language (Csernicskó et al., 2020; Tátrai et al., 2018).

The project “Cross-Border Language Accessibility in Public Life” (Language APL) is implemented under the Interreg HUSKROUA programme, in accordance with the European Union’s strategic objectives of enhancing regional cohesion, accessibility, and cross-border interoperability. Recognising the enduring impact of shifting borders and demographic changes along the Hungarian–Ukrainian–Romanian frontier — particularly the linguistic consequences for minority communities — the project seeks to address the multilingual demands of both official and private spheres in borderland regions.

In response to historical transformations and recent migration flows intensified by the Russo–Ukrainian war, the project is grounded in the recognition that effective communication and the public visibility of minority and neighbouring-state languages are essential for both the protection of linguistic rights and the facilitation of economic cooperation. It aligns with the broader objectives of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the European Accessibility Act, acknowledging that the marginalisation of minority languages can hinder integration, service access, and regional development.

The initiative targets two primary goals: to promote and strengthen the enforcement of minority language rights within the European Union and its borderlands, and to enhance multilingual communication practices in order to stimulate cross-border economic and social cooperation. To achieve these aims, the project undertakes activities such as identifying best-practice sites of multilingualism, providing translation support for businesses and public institutions, disseminating legal information to minority communities, and organising an international conference to share outcomes and highlight successful models of language accessibility.

One of the key coordinators of the project is the Antal Hodinka Research Centre for Linguistics (Ukraine), alongside partners from Hungary, Romania, and Ukraine, and builds on previous empirical research documenting a growing societal demand for the institutional use of Hungarian and for multilingual solutions in both public and commercial domains. The dual objective is to strengthen minority language rights and foster multilingualism as a tool for regional economic cooperation. Activities include the identification and documentation of best practices in multilingual signage, translation support for local businesses and institutions, and legal information dissemination to minority communities. The present study offers

insight into the research conducted at the Antal Hodinka Research Centre for Linguistics, which participates in the project as a key partner. As contributors, our primary focus lies in the collection and analysis of empirical data on linguistic practices in Transcarpathia, with particular emphasis on the linguistic landscape as a reflection of language use, visibility, and accessibility in public space. Through the identification of multilingual sites, documentation of signage practices, and engagement with local stakeholders, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how language policy, minority rights, and spatial practices intersect in borderland contexts. The examples shown in the current study mainly focus on the town of Berehove (an urban setting with the largest Hungarian minority community) and the settlements located within the catchment area of the town (Berehove District), as the first part of our research process took place there.

2. The focus of the research project

Different major areas can be identified within the field of linguistic landscape (LL) studies. The most fundamental area focuses on analysing language use in public spaces as it relates to language policy. This dimension of LL research investigates the visibility and positioning of different languages, evaluating both their functional and symbolic roles within a given context, often in relation to the legal frameworks governing language rights (Híres-László-Tóth-Orosz-Máté, 2023). A key consideration in this type of analysis is whether a particular sign was placed by a private individual or by an official institution. Cook (2022) highlights various classifications used to differentiate such signage: signs posted by governmental entities versus those by individuals have been labelled as ‘public’ versus ‘private’ (Landry-Bourhis, 1997), ‘top-down’ versus ‘bottom-up’ (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006), or ‘official’ versus ‘non-official’ (Backhaus, 2006). In the context of Transcarpathia, language policy of the Ukrainian state is characterised by its dynamic and frequently shifting nature, often influenced by broader political, legal, and sociocultural developments. As a result, any analysis of the linguistic landscape in the region must carefully consider the current state of language policy, as well as recent legislative changes and their implementation. These evolving policy frameworks significantly shape the visibility, positioning, and functions of languages in public space.

A crucial dimension of linguistic landscape (LL) analysis is the distinction between top-down and bottom-up signage (Landry-Bourhis, 1997; Backhaus, 2006; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). In line with this, the present research project deliberately engages with both spheres of sign production. On the one hand, the official sector encompasses municipal governments and local councils, district-level administrations, and educational institutions, all of which play a central role in the regulated and policy-driven display of languages in public space. On the

other hand, the private sphere includes civil and religious organisations, community associations, and commercial enterprises whose signage practices reflect local agency, market strategies, and identity negotiation. By analysing the interplay between these top-down and bottom-up practices, we aim to capture the full complexity of multilingual display in Transcarpathia and to show how formal policy frameworks intersect with everyday communicative practices.

2.1. The official / top-down sector

The official sector encompasses actors and institutions that represent the state or carry delegated authority, and whose language practices are strongly influenced by legal and administrative frameworks.

This sector includes:

- Municipal governments and local councils, which regulate street signs, place names, and administrative communication;
- District-level administrations, responsible for implementing national language policies across broader territorial units;
- Educational institutions, which not only display signage but also communicate linguistic priorities through their public presence (school boards, nameplates, banners).

Signs produced in this sector typically reflect the current language legislation and its enforcement, making them particularly sensitive indicators of policy change. They embody the top-down dimension of language planning, often signalling official priorities in language use.

2.2. The private / bottom-up sector

The private sector is made up of actors outside the immediate control of the state and includes:

- Civil organisations (cultural associations, NGOs, minority advocacy groups),
- Religious institutions (churches, parishes, different church-related institutions),
- Community associations, and
- Commercial enterprises (shops, restaurants, service providers, etc.).

Signage in this sector often reflects local agency, identity, and market strategies. It may resist or reinterpret official policies by maintaining minority language presence, or by creatively mixing codes and visual elements. Unlike the official sector, bottom-up signage is more flexible and adaptive, responding directly to community needs and consumer demographics. Building on earlier work conducted at the Antal Hodinka Research Centre for Linguistics, the project also aims to continue investigating the economic usefulness of multilingualism in this sector (see Csernicskó, 2017, 2018; Csernicskó et al., 2021; Hires-László-Máté-Tóth-Orosz, 2022). In particular, we seek to understand how the use of Hungarian,

Ukrainian, and other languages in signage, branding, and online communication contributes to attracting customers, expanding markets, and strengthening community-based economic networks. By approaching multilingualism not only as a cultural and symbolic resource but also as a potential driver of local economic development, the research links linguistic landscape analysis with broader questions of entrepreneurship, cross-border trade, and regional integration.

2.3. *Digital linguistic landscape*

Beyond visible inscriptions in physical space, our project also explores the parallel domain of digital linguistic landscapes. In both the official and private sectors, online platforms have become increasingly important arenas where language policies, choices, and ideologies are enacted and contested. Official digital communication includes municipal and district websites, online press releases, and institutional social media accounts. These channels project official linguistic stances and frequently demonstrate compliance with state regulations.

Private digital communication encompasses the online presence of civil organisations, businesses, and minority communities. Social media pages, websites, and digital advertisements often employ multilingual practices that differ from regulated offline environments, and in some cases, are visible exclusively in the online sphere.

By incorporating both physical and digital manifestations of signage, the project provides a more comprehensive account of how top-down and bottom-up forces interact across different communicative domains. This dual perspective allows for an investigation not only of official and community practices in public space, but also of how these practices extend into or diverge within the online environment.

2.4. *An integrative perspective*

Analysing the interplay between official and private, offline and online linguistic landscapes allows us to capture the full complexity of multilingual display in Transcarpathia. By situating top-down and bottom-up practices alongside their digital and physical manifestations, the project seeks to provide a multi-layered account of how languages are positioned, contested, and reinterpreted in the region. This comprehensive approach makes it possible to demonstrate not only how formal policy frameworks intersect with everyday communicative practices, but also how local communities negotiate visibility, identity, and belonging both in the material streetscape and in the expanding digital domain.

In order to explore these processes systematically, the research relies on a combination of methodologies that address the specific characteristics of each sector. The official sphere is investigated through language policy analysis, archival research, documentation of institutional signage and expert interviews,

while the private sector is examined through ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and the study of community-driven and commercial inscriptions. Digital landscapes, in turn, are analysed by means of online LL analysis and the systematic collection of multilingual practices on websites and social media platforms. This integration of methods ensures that both the regulated, policy-driven dimensions and the more spontaneous, agentive practices of language use are adequately represented.

The following subchapters will therefore move from this general outline to a more detailed discussion of the methodological tools employed in each domain. By presenting how we operationalised multimodal, ethnographic, and digital and sensory approaches, these sections aim to show how different techniques were mobilised to investigate the full spectrum of linguistic landscape practices across official and private, offline and online settings.

3. Multimodal approaches in LL analysis

LL analysis now often integrates visual, auditory, spatial, and material dimensions of signage and public texts. In recent years, linguistic landscape (LL) studies have increasingly incorporated multimodal approaches to better understand how meaning is constructed in public space through the interaction of various semiotic resources. Multimodality refers to the use and interplay of multiple communicative modes – such as linguistic, visual, spatial, typographic, and material elements – that collectively contribute to the overall meaning of a sign or display (Kress–van Leeuwen, 2006; Jaworski–Thurlow eds., 2010).

Figure 1. An example of multiculturalism in the LL of Transcarpathia



Source: The picture was taken by the authors

While earlier LL research predominantly focused on written language, contemporary scholars emphasise that signs are not merely linguistic artefacts. Rather, they are multisemiotic texts shaped by design features such as colour, imagery, font, layout, and spatial placement, all of which convey ideological, cultural, or emotional meanings (Scollon–Scollon, 2003; Shohamy–Gorter, 2009). For example, a shop sign may combine text with national symbols, commercial logos, or culturally resonant visual motifs, thereby signalling ethnic identity, or social values.

This perspective is particularly relevant in conflict-affected or borderland regions, where signage becomes a key site for negotiating national identity, power relations, and memory politics. A multimodal analysis enables researchers to explore not only what languages are present, but also how the materiality and visual composition of signs index broader social and political processes (Blackwood–Lanza–Woldemariam eds., 2016). A multisensory approach goes further to consider non-visual dimensions of the LL, including soundscapes (Scarvaglieri–Pappenhagen–Redder, 2016), smellscape (Henshaw, 2013), tactile elements, and movement, reflecting how language and space are experienced bodily and affectively.

4. Beyond the signs: ethnography and LL

Ethnographic methodology originates from the field of anthropology. As both a research process and a descriptive outcome, ethnography involves the examination of human interaction strategies and the analytical portrayal of social contexts, individuals, and communities. It aims to capture and interpret shared emotions, beliefs, practices, artifacts, folk knowledge, and behaviours within a cultural framework. In *The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods* (Jupp, 2006), ethnographic research is characterised as a methodological approach employed by both sociologists and anthropologists. It is best understood as a blend of various methods grounded in the core belief that personal immersion in the field is essential for comprehending a particular cultural or social environment. While participant observation remains the most prominent technique, ethnographers also make use of interviews, conversational and discourse analysis, documentary review, visual media such as film and photography, and life history accounts. At the heart of ethnography lies detailed description, through which the goal is to reveal the deep meanings of social life as perceived from the everyday standpoint of group members (Hobbs, 2006).

Watson-Gegeo (1988) outlines four foundational principles of ethnographic research. These include:

- a) the view that group behaviour is deeply embedded in cultural context;
- b) the recognition of the connection between micro-level contexts and broader macro-level structures;

- c) the role of theoretical frameworks in shaping research questions and contextualising observed phenomena;
- d) the aim of understanding a given situation on its own terms.

An important area of LL research involves the interpretation of signage as a reflection of broader social patterns. In recent decades, the linguistic landscape of settlements in Transcarpathia has received growing scholarly attention. The visual presence of languages in public spaces serves as a tangible indicator of socio-political processes in the region and provides valuable insights into shifts in language policy, cultural and social dynamics, and the expression of underlying ideologies. In Transcarpathia, a considerable number of studies have been conducted on the linguistic landscape, reflecting the region's complex multilingual setting and its evolving socio-political context. These investigations have examined the visibility, distribution, and symbolic functions of languages in public space, often in relation to changes in language policy and minority language rights. The growing body of research underscores the importance of LL studies as a tool for understanding not only language use but also broader cultural, ideological, and political dynamics in the region (for a summary on recent LL studies conducted in the region, see: Hires-László-Tóth-Orosz-Máté, 2023).

As in any other context, in Transcarpathia it is essential to consider language policy when analysing the linguistic landscape, as it provides the legal and institutional framework that shapes language visibility and use in public space. However, to fully grasp the complexities of the linguistic landscape, it is necessary to move beyond the surface-level examination of signs and explore the deeper historical, and ideological or cultural layers that inform their production, placement, and interpretation. This involves investigating the motivations of sign-makers, the reception and perception of signage by different communities, and the broader discourses of identity, power, and resistance that are embedded in the visual linguistic environment.

Ethnographic approaches in linguistic landscape (LL) analysis move beyond surface-level documentation of signage to explore the social practices, experiences, and meanings associated with language use in public space. These methods emphasise contextual depth, aiming to understand how individuals and communities interpret, negotiate, and engage with the linguistic environment around them (Blommaert, 2013).

Rather than treating signs as static texts, ethnographic LL research investigates who produces signs, for whom, under what conditions, and how these signs are received by different groups. This often involves participant observation, semi-structured interviews, fieldnotes, photo-documentation, and discourse analysis. By embedding the researcher in the field, these methods allow for a more nuanced understanding of power

relations, ideologies, language hierarchies, and social identities that shape and are shaped by the visible linguistic landscape (Malinowski, 2009).

Ethnographic LL studies are particularly valuable in multilingual spaces, where signage becomes a site of symbolic expression or even exclusion. For example, in Transcarpathia, ethnographic fieldwork can shed light on how minority communities perceive the visibility (or erasure) of their languages in public signage, how local actors respond to top-down language policies, and how everyday practices of sign-making and sign-reading reflect broader social tensions. Ethnographic methods enrich LL research by foregrounding agency, experience, and interpretation, offering insights into the lived realities of language in place that static textual analysis alone cannot capture.

In our LL analysis, we used a qualitative, actor-centred approach that focuses on the people behind the signs – those who create, install, maintain, interpret them. Rather than viewing signage as static or anonymous text, this method emphasises the social agents and their intentions, identities, and ideologies. We shift attention from merely documenting signs to understanding the human actions and decisions behind them. While planning the fieldwork, our main questions were the following:

- Who produced this sign? Why was it created in this way, in this language, in this space?
- What ideologies or power relations are embedded in it?
- How do different agents (state, business, minority actors) negotiate visibility?

5. Methodological tools used in our LL analysis

5.1. Language policy analysis

As part of our methodological approach, we employ archival and policy analysis to trace the top-down decision-making processes that shape the linguistic landscape, particularly focusing on how language laws and urban planning policies influence the design and language choices of public signage. Since 2014, the Ukrainian government has enacted a series of legislative measures that have significantly curtailed the rights and opportunities for the public use of minority languages (see Csernicskó et al., 2023; Csernicskó–Kontra, 2023).

The regulation of public signage in Ukraine is currently governed by a network of legal provisions that mandate the exclusive use of the state language, Ukrainian, while narrowly defining the conditions under which minority languages may be displayed. The 2019 State Language Law designates Ukrainian as the sole official language (URL1). Following the Minority Law of 2022 (URL2), in February 2024 (URL3), a new methodological framework was adopted to clarify the legal conditions under which national minority languages may be used in public signage

and administrative communication. This framework applies specifically to localities where persons belonging to national minorities traditionally reside.

In Transcarpathia, there exists a long-standing tradition of using multilingual nameplates, stamps, seals, and official forms. However, from the second half of 2021, several settlements began replacing these bilingual signs with monolingual Ukrainian ones, reflecting the growing alignment of local administrative practice with national language policy priorities (Csernicskó et al., 2023). In Transcarpathia, shifting language policies have played a significant role in shaping the linguistic landscape, influencing every aspect of public language use. These changes are reflected not only in the presence or absence of certain languages but also in the visual appearance, design, placement, and hierarchical positioning of signs. From the choice of language(s) and script to the size, prominence, and stylistic features of signage, language policy developments have left a visible imprint on the region's public spaces.

As part of our language policy analysis, we compiled all current legal provisions governing the use of minority languages across various domains, including public administration, education, and media. This material was subsequently published in a bilingual booklet (Ukrainian and Hungarian), with the aim of providing participants with a clear understanding of the legal framework that presently informs and regulates language use in public signage.

5.2. Ethnographic and walking (expert) interviews

In order to investigate the processes underlying the construction of the linguistic landscape in Transcarpathia, this research project adopts an agentive and ethnographically formed methodological approach (cf. Scollon–Scollon, 2003; Leeman–Modan, 2009; Blommaert, 2013; Gorter–Cenoz, 2023). Beyond the visual documentation of signage, particular attention is paid to the human agents responsible for the creation, regulation, and interpretation of public texts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key local actors – including municipal officials, community and religious leaders, school directors, and entrepreneurs operating within the commercial sphere – who actively shape the linguistic landscape either through formal governance structures or through everyday practices. These interviews aimed to elicit participants' perspectives on language use, legal compliance, symbolic visibility, and identity negotiation within public signage. This agent-centred approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how signage practices reflect the interplay between top-down state language policies and bottom-up strategies of local communities (Kallen, 2009; Shohamy–Ben-Rafael–Barni eds., 2010). The methodological framework is grounded in the principles of geosemiotics (Scollon–Scollon, 2003) and enriched by the multimodal

and multisensory turn in LL research, which emphasises not only the textual content but also the spatial positioning, materiality, and affective dimensions of signage.

In addition to walking interviews and ethnographic conversations, which proved particularly fruitful in exploring the practices and perspectives of private actors in the bottom-up sector, the project also made use of expert interviews when examining the official, top-down domain (Meuser–Nagel, 2009). These interviews were conducted with representatives of municipal and district administrations, as well as with directors of educational institutions, in order to gain insight into how language policies are implemented in practice and how decision-makers justify or interpret their choices regarding signage. By complementing the ethnographic accounts of everyday actors with the perspectives of institutional experts, the research was able to capture both the policy-driven rationale and the lived realities of linguistic landscape production, thereby offering a more balanced and multi-layered analysis.

Through combining visual landscape analysis with ethnographic insights from sign producers, the research foregrounds the agentive dimension of multilingual public space and seeks answers for occasions of monolingual appearance of the signage. Photo-elicitation was involved using photographs as prompts during interviews to stimulate discussion, reflection, or storytelling. In linguistic landscape studies, this technique is especially valuable for accessing the subjective interpretations, emotional associations, backstories that signs evoke among community members or stakeholders (Pink, 2007; Rose, 2016). When applied in our research context, a region marked by multilingualism and shifting language policies, showing photos previously taken during fieldwork to the respondents enables researchers to explore how individuals perceive the meanings of multilingual signs in their everyday environment.

5.3. *Landscapes for all senses: vision, sound, and material decay*

Recent linguistic landscape studies have increasingly turned toward approaches that move beyond static understandings of multilingualism. In this context, the concept of metrolingualism, as developed by Pennycook and Otsuji (2015), offers a particularly productive lens through which to analyse language practices in urban, superdiverse settings such as Berehove. Metrolingualism emphasises the fluid, creative, and often hybridised ways in which language users draw on diverse linguistic resources in everyday interactions, rather than adhering to rigidly bounded language systems. Metrolingualism views linguistic resources as dynamic and interactionally negotiated. It highlights how speakers in urban environments — especially in contexts of post-socialist and post-conflict transformation — construct meaning through strategic code-mixing, translanguaging.

In the case of Berehove, this perspective helps illuminate how individuals navigate the region's complex linguistic ecology, shaped by Ukrainian state language

policies, Hungarian minority presence, and increasing exposure to English as a global lingua franca. For instance, speech events in public markets, informal signage on shop windows, or social media discourse frequently feature simultaneous use of Ukrainian, Hungarian (or in some cases even English, mostly in written form) elements within a single utterance or sign. These practices are not merely incidental but serve as meaningful strategies of linguistic accommodation, identity expression, and communicative efficiency in a multilingual urban space.

By applying the lens of metrolingualism, our study seeks to account not only for the linguistic content of public signage but also for the social interactions and semiotic processes that shape the linguistic landscape of Transcarpathia in the consequences/aftermath of war and shifting language ideologies. However, one has to keep in mind that the concept of metrolingualism offers limited tools for systematic analysis of language practices, making it difficult to operationalise in comparative or large-scale studies.

To complement our linguistic landscape analysis, we recorded several additional videos that capture the auditory environment of Berehove's streets. This footage offers a glimpse into another dimension of the main square during an air raid alert. In this case, the focus shifts from signage – which fades into the background – to the ambient sounds (soundscape) and the reactions of passersby. BodyCam or smartphone recordings allow dynamic interaction with space and signage (Troyer-Szabó, 2017; Hires-László-Máté 2025).²

One of the most prominent examples of the importance of including other elements in the analysis rather than vision is the meaning behind the material decay of signs. Street names function not only as practical tools for spatial orientation but also as potent symbolic instruments through which political regimes project their values, ideologies, and historical narratives onto the public realm (Azaryahu, 1996). Acts of naming are inherently political, serving to legitimise specific historical figures, events, or ideologies in everyday life, while simultaneously silencing or marginalising alternative perspectives. In Ukraine, processes of de-Russification began in the aftermath of the 2014 political upheaval and were significantly accelerated following the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022. On 20 September 2022, amendments to the law on geographical names further reinforced these efforts. The implementation of bilingual signage is now closely aligned with prevailing language policy agendas and geopolitical priorities, particularly the centralisation of the Ukrainian language as a core marker of national identity. The escalation of war has propelled symbolic renaming practices into a new phase, intensifying efforts to expunge Russian influence from Ukraine's urban and linguistic landscapes.

² For examples, visit the YouTube channel of our research centre:
<https://www.youtube.com/@HodinkaAntalNyelvészetiKutatók>

In Berehove, the City Council undertook a standardisation of street name signage in 2013, installing bilingual decorative nameplates bearing the city's coat of arms, thereby resolving decades of post-Soviet inconsistency. However, in April 2022, a special council was formed to manage the renaming and de-Russification process, which ultimately led to the introduction of monolingual Ukrainian signs in the summer of 2023. Drawing on the concept of semiotic landscapes, recent studies pay particular attention to the physical characteristics of signage — its texture, materiality, and states of wear or decay — as indicators of symbolic transformation (Stroud-Mpendukana, 2009). Notably, in many settlements, the deterioration is most evident in older, unreplaced signs. These remnants, often faded and damaged, are not merely material artifacts but are also the last remaining instances of multilingual (top-down) street signage, offering a fragile yet revealing glimpse into the region's former linguistic diversity.

Figure 2. Visual representations of decaying street signage in Transcarpathia from different decades



Source: The pictures were taken by the authors

6. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated the value of a multimodal, multisensory, and ethnographic approach to linguistic landscape research in Transcarpathia. By integrating geosemiotic analysis of signs, with multimodal analysis of visual and material features, we moved beyond textual content to consider spatial placement,

design, and even auditory elements of public signage. An agentive, ethnographically-informed methodology was crucial: we conducted semi-structured walking interviews with key local actors (from officials to business owners), focusing on those who create, regulate, or contest public texts. We also employed innovative multisensory data collection techniques – including video recordings of street scenes and soundscape documentation – in line with recent methodological expansions in linguistic landscape (LL) studies. By using fieldwork photographs as prompts in interviews, we accessed participants’ subjective interpretations and emotional responses to local signage. Together, these methods provided a richly layered understanding of how meaning is constructed and experienced in public space, allowing us to capture subtleties of minority language display that single-mode analyses might overlook.

Figure 3. The application of different methodologies in the research project and their usefulness



Source: Created by the authors

Applying these methodologies in a war-affected, multilingual region carries significant implications. Transcarpathia’s linguistic landscape has become a demonstration of political change, especially under Ukraine’s changing language regime amid war. Our multimodal observations show that public signage is not merely informational but also deeply ideological in this context. We found that

local authorities increasingly aligned with these policies by replacing long-standing bilingual signs with monolingual Ukrainian ones. This trend has intensified following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. By capturing voices and sensory details on the field, our approach exposed the adaptations that define the linguistic landscape in this borderland. Examining the linguistic landscape through the combined lens of top-down and bottom-up practices, complemented by digital analysis, offers a more layered and reliable account of language use in Transcarpathia. The official, top-down sector highlights how language policy and institutional regulation directly shape the visibility and hierarchy of languages in public space, while the private, bottom-up sector reveals the creative strategies of communities, businesses, and associations in negotiating their identity, marketing strategies and multilingual presence. By extending the analysis into the digital sphere, the project is able to capture how these dynamics are rearticulated online, where both official institutions and private actors often employ multilingual repertoires differently than in physical space. Together, these perspectives underscore that a full understanding of the region's linguistic landscape must integrate regulated, community-driven, and digital practices.

To sum up, analysing Transcarpathia's public texts through a multimodal ethnographic lens reveals not only what languages are seen or unseen, but also how communities assert their presence and values.

Taken together, our preliminary findings also demonstrate that integrating multiple approaches to linguistic landscape research can yield a more marked and nuanced understanding of the real dynamics of multilingual public space. By combining multimodal, ethnographic, and digital analyses, we are able to capture not only the presence or absence of languages but also the diversity of forms, functions, and interpretations of signage. This methodological synthesis provides a richer and more comprehensive picture of the studying of linguistic landscape, highlighting how varied semiotic resources — from physical signs to online communication — collectively shape the visibility and vitality of languages in Transcarpathia.

This research project opens several avenues for further inquiry. Using GIS mapping or interactive digital platforms to overlay photographs, sound recordings, and community narratives could create richer representations of linguistic landscapes. Further refinements should be done that would not only improve data quality. In conclusion, our study highlights that linguistic landscape research, especially when broadened through multimodal and ethnographic innovations, is a powerful tool for understanding the complexities of language and identity in multilingual societies. By continuing to push the methodological boundaries and focusing on the human experiences behind public texts, future research can further illuminate how minority languages survive, adapt, or thrive amid the profound crises and changes of our time.

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Beyond the signs: multimodal approaches in analysing multilingual landscapes in Transcarpathia (Ukraine)

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This study investigates the multilingual and multimodal dimensions of the linguistic landscape (LL) in Transcarpathia, a historically contested borderland region of western Ukraine marked by political transformations, demographic shifts, and an ongoing conflict. Home to Ukraine’s largest Hungarian minority, the region has witnessed the gradual restriction of minority language rights through legislation such as the 2017 Law on Education and the 2019 State Language Law, alongside intensified de-Russification policies after 2022. Against this backdrop, the project *Cross-Border Language Accessibility in Public Life* explores how language policy, multilingual practices, and community agency intersect in public signage and communicative spaces. Building on previous research of the Antal Hodinka Research Centre for Linguistics, our approach integrates multimodal and ethnographic methods to examine not only the textual content of signs but also their visual, spatial, material, and sensory dimensions. Data collection combined geosemiotic analysis, video- and sound-recordings, and ethnographic fieldwork, including semi-structured walking interviews with local officials, school directors, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. Photo-elicitation techniques further revealed subjective interpretations and emotional responses to signage. The findings highlight how multilingual public texts function as ideological instruments that both reflect and reshape identity politics, particularly as bilingual signs are replaced with monolingual Ukrainian ones. Multimodal observations also demonstrate that signs’ material decay, spatial positioning, and sensory environments embody symbolic struggles over memory and belonging. By foregrounding the agency of sign producers and the lived experiences of minority communities, this study argues that LL research must move beyond static documentation toward multimodal, multisensory, and actor-centred perspectives. Such approaches not only capture the complexities of multilingualism under conditions of war and shifting policy but also provide critical insights into how minority languages adapt, resist, or fade within contested borderland societies.

Keywords: *linguistic landscape, multilingualism, ethnography, Transcarpathia.*

Поза межами знаків: мультимодальні підходи до аналізу багатомовних ландшафтів на Закарпатті (Україна)

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У статті проаналізовано багатомовні та мультимодальні виміри лінгвістичного ландшафту (LL) на Закарпатті – історично специфічному прикордонному регіоні на заході України, що зазнав численних політичних трансформацій, демографічних зрушень і перебуває в умовах тривалого конфлікту. Тут проживає найбільша угорська меншина України, права якої поступово обмежуються законодавчими актами, зокрема Законом «Про освіту» (2017) та Законом «Про державну мову» (2019), а після 2022 року – посиленою політикою дерусифікації. У цьому контексті метою проекту «*Транскордонна мовна доступність у суспільному просторі*» є дослідження того, як мовна політика, практика багатомовності та громадська активність переплітаються у сфері публічних написів і комунікативних просторів. Спираючись на попередні дослідження Науково-дослідного центру імені Антонія Годинки, наше дослідження поєднує мультимодальні та етнографічні методи для вивчення не лише текстового змісту знаків, але й їхніх візуальних, просторових, матеріальних і сенсорних характеристик. Збір даних містить геосеміотичний аналіз, відео- та аудіозаписи, а також етнографічне польове дослідження із напівструктурованими інтерв'ю у формі «пішки» з місцевими посадовцями, директорами шкіл, підприємцями та лідерами громад. З використанням техніки фотоелісації виявлено суб'єктивні інтерпретації та емоційні реакції на публічні написи. Результати показують, що багатомовні публічні тексти функціонують як ідеологічні інструменти, які одночасно відображають і трансформують політику ідентичності, особливо тоді, коли двомовні знаки замінюють українськими, тобто одномовними. Мультимодальні спостереження засвідчують, що матеріальна зношеність знаків, їхнє просторове розташування та сенсорне середовище уособлюють символічну боротьбу за пам'ять і належність. Наголошуючи на агентності творців написів і досвіді спільнот національних меншин, доведено необхідність переходу від статичної документації LL до мультимодальних, мультисенсорних підходів. Такі методи відображають не лише складність багатомовності в умовах війни та мовної політики, яка швидко змінюється, але й надають критичні інсайти про те, як мови меншин можуть бути збережені або ж зникають у прикордонних регіонах.

Ключові слова: лінгвістичний ландшафт, багатомовність, етнографія, Закарпаття.

A jeleken túl: multimodális megközelítések a kárpátaljai többnyelvű nyelvi tájkép elemzésében

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A tanulmány a nyelvi tájkép (LL) többnyelvű és multimodális dimenzióinak vizsgálatát mutatja be Ukrajna nyugati határvidékén, Kárpátalján. A régió történelmi múltja, politikai átalakulásai, demográfiai változásai és egy jelenleg is folyó fegyveres konfliktus mind jelentős hatással vannak a nyelvhasználatra. A térségben él Ukrajna legnagyobb magyar közössége, amelynek nyelvi jogai az utóbbi években fokozatosan szűkültek. Ezt többek között a 2017-es oktatási törvény, a 2019-es államnyelvtörvény, valamint a 2022 után felerősödő derusszifikációs politika befolyásolta. E kontextusban a *Határokon átnyúló nyelvi akadálymentesítés a közéletben* című projekt azt vizsgálja, miként fonódik össze a nyelvpolitika, a többnyelvű gyakorlat és a közösség a közterületi feliratokban és kommunikációs terekben. A Hodinka Antal Nyelvészeti Kutatóközpont korábbi kutatásaira építve módszertanunk egyfajta sokrétű, etnográfiai módszerekben gyökerező megközelítést alkalmaz, amely nemcsak a kihelyezett táblák nyelvi tartalmát, hanem vizuális, térbeli, szenzoros dimenzióit is elemzi. Az adatgyűjtés geoszemiotikai elemzést, videó- és hangfelvételeket, online és offline térben megvalósuló elemzéseket, valamint etnográfiai terepmunkát foglalt magában, beleértve a félig strukturált „sétáló” interjúkat, helyi tisztviselőkkel, iskolaigazgatókkal, vállalkozókkal, közösségi és vallási vezetőkkel való beszélgetéseket. A kutatás célja feltárni a közterületi feliratokhoz fűződő szubjektív értelmezéseket és érzelmi reakciókat is. Az előzetes eredmények rámutatnak arra, hogy a többnyelvű nyilvános szövegek ideológiai eszközként is működnek, amelyek egyszerre tükrözik a nyelvpolitika aktuális törvényi kereteit, lehetőségeit, különösen akkor, amikor a kétnyelvű táblákat egynyelvű ukrán feliratok váltják fel. A megfigyelések azt is kimutatták, hogy a táblák állapota, térbeli elhelyezése, környezete egyfajta szimbolikus küzdelmeket is megtestesít. A feliratokat kihelyezők ügynöki szerepére és a kisebbségi közösségek tapasztalataira összpontosítva a tanulmány bemutatja, hogy a nyelvitájkép-kutatásnak túl kell lépnie az egyszerű fotódokumentáción, és sokrétűbb, összetettebb megközelítések felé kell fordulnia. A tanulmányban bemutatott módszerek nemcsak a többnyelvűség összetettségét ragadják meg a háborús körülmények és a folyamatosan változó nyelvpolitika fényében, hanem betekintést nyújtanak abba is, miként alkalmazkodhatnak, maradhatnak fenn vagy tűnhetnek el kisebbségi nyelvek határmenti közösségekben.

Kulcsszavak: *nyelvi tájkép, többnyelvűség, etnográfia, Kárpátalja.*