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Linguistic landscapes in the sociolinguistic and foreign language teaching research field in the Czech Republic

ABSTRACT. This article investigates the potential of incorporating the sociolinguistic concept of the linguistic landscape (LL) into foreign language teaching, with particular attention to its applicability as a valuable supplementary resource in language education. Following a definition of the LL framework and a summary of current theoretical and methodological discussions, the article presents a concise overview of the development of this expansive sociolinguistic field, with a specific focus on the status of LL research within the Czech context. The analysis then turns to the didactic implications of the LL, exploring its utility in foreign language instruction. Drawing on illustrative examples and the author's own teaching experience, the article demonstrates practical applications of LL in the teaching of German as a Foreign Language, both in teacher education and classroom practice, within the urban environment of Brno, Czech Republic.

KEYWORDS: linguistic landscape, research, sociolinguistics, foreign language teaching, teaching German as a foreign language.

1. DEFINING LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

Since the invention of writing, people have been publicly presenting their language(s). Written announcements or appeals have become such a natural part of our everyday life that we often no longer even perceive the presence of written language in public spaces (Huebner 2016: 1). The appearance of different languages in public spaces, including their roles and functions, attracted the attention of many scientific disciplines at the end of the last century and the beginning of the new millennium. The sociolinguistic relevance of how language is represented in public spaces (Huebner 2016: 1) was already acknowledged by Landry and Bourhis (1997), who introduced the term linguistic landscape (Sprachlandschaft, Sprachenlandschaft) into the specialist discussion. They define linguistic landscape as linguistic signs that “are visible on signs or posters placed in public spaces” (Landry & Bourhis 1997: 23). LLs appear in various forms, such as posters, graffiti, advertising posters, street or shop signs, or commemorative

plaques. Cenoz and Gorter (2008: 267) also point out the diversity of textual forms and locations of LL in public spaces:

Language is visible in the public domain in its textual mode as words which are displayed on shop windows, commercial signs, posters, official notices, traffic signs, etc. This ‘linguistic landscape’ refers to all the language items that are visible in a specified part of the public space (Cenoz & Gorter 2008: 267).

In addition to the above-mentioned LL forms, LLs may also include street signs, warning signs or prohibition signs on buildings, inscriptions, or graffiti (Landry & Bourhis 1997; Spolsky & Cooper 1991; Schiedermaier 2015). As linguistic landscape research further evolves, the concept itself also becomes more differentiated. Today, for instance, we distinguish between LLs in semi-public spaces, i.e., administrative or educational institutions and company buildings (Marten & Saagpakk 2017: 7), and LLs in public spaces, such as generally accessible transit areas. Alongside this, the category of “movable signs” (Riehl 2014: 26) has now gained traction, encompassing, for example, advertisements on buses or signs on protest banners (Gorter 2018), bags, clothing items, or packaging. Due to technological advancements, which have brought about objects such as virtual spaces, the internet, and cyberspaces (Shohamy & Gorter 2009), virtual LLs have also come into researchers’ focus, including electronic flat screens, touchscreens, and scrolling banners (Gorter & Cenoz 2017). At the same time, interactions with soundscapes, smellscapes, and other semiotic phenomena, as well as typographic linguistic landscapes as distinct forms of representation (design resources) and socially relevant positioning resources, are being investigated (Ziegler & Marten 2021: 15).

Thus, the term LL refers to all linguistic symbols visible in a specific area of public space. In certain cases, these signs, placed in such a way, allow for deep insights into the sociocultural, societal, and political conditions of a given urban space. They provide conclusions regarding “[...] the shared use of language, migration languages, language prestige, and even language policy” (Krompák 2018: 247). Minority languages are also not excluded here. LLs simultaneously convey an image of the linguistic and cultural diversity in the everyday life of the respective society.

The following two chapters offer a brief overview of the development of linguistic landscape research in the international context (Chapter 3) and in the Czech Republic (Chapter 4), with particular emphasis on methodological approaches. The following chapter (Chapter 5) provides an overview of the use of linguistic landscapes in foreign language teaching and their didactic potential.

2. METHODOLOGY OF OVERVIEWS

In terms of methodology, a search was conducted in the Web of Science and Scopus databases (including scholarly articles and edited volumes). Subsequently, a selection of journal articles and academic theses (bachelor's and master's) focusing on the Czech context was made. These sources were identified not only through the Scopus database but also via publicly available online sources and search engines from Czech universities. An initial keyword search was carried out using the terms *linguistic landscapes*, *research*, *sociolinguistic*, *foreign language teaching*, *German as a foreign language*, *thesis* (in English, German and Czech).

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- it is an empirical study presenting original research on linguistic landscapes in the field of sociolinguistics and language education,
- the study / article is written in English, German, or Czech,
- the study had been published between 2003–2023.

3. LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE AS A RESEARCH FIELD

Even the types of LL listed above indicate how this research field has expanded and differentiated over the last quarter-century. Naturally, this also affects the methodological approaches to investigating visible language in public spaces. This development is confirmed by numerous scholarly articles and edited volumes (e.g., Huebner 2016; Mensel, Vandenbroucke & Blackwood 2016; Krompák 2018; Schulze 2018; Pütz & Mundt 2019; Ziegler & Marten 2021) as well as studies in the journal *Linguistic Landscape*¹, which has been publishing research on linguistic landscapes in various areas and from different perspectives since 2015.

Early LL research was primarily situated in the sociolinguistic field and was heavily quantitative, focusing especially on “the proportional distribution of languages and the linguistic description of signs” (Krompák 2018: 250). A macro-sociolinguistic approach to language in the societal context predominated: frequency data on the occurrence of LLs in certain languages were used to make inferences about the status of these languages in a given society and about the social significance of the corresponding speaker groups (Schulze 2018: 5; Ziegler & Marten 2021: 13). The place where the LLs were

¹ Studies on linguistic landscapes can also be found in other academic journals such as the *International Journal of Multilingualism*, *International Journal of Sociology and Language*, and *Language Policy*.

documented is usually the modern (major) city (see, for example, the studies by Landry & Bourhis 1997; Gorter 2006; Backhaus 2007; Ben Rafael et al. 2006; Barni 2008; Barni & Bagna 2008; Shohamy & Gorter 2009; Coupland & Garrett 2010; Jaworski 2010).

In later studies, the focus shifted more to the linguistic practices of specific publicly active actors in the sense of Blommaert, who assumes that the signs in public space lead us to particular practices, which in turn lead us to people living in a given area in a particular configuration, with a certain degree of regulation and order and various forms of social and cultural organization (Blommaert 2013: 50). In linguistic landscapes research, increasing attention is paid to questions of semiotic function, reception, and impact of LL, with the public space being perceived as a discursive space in which something is negotiated, bargained, or manifested. Writing in public spaces is understood as an act of performance (Warnke 2011). Along with this new focus, an ethnographic approach is often pursued (e.g., Blommaert 2013; Blommaert & Maly 2014), using qualitative methods such as participant observation and ethnographic interviews, which require a longer stay of researchers in the field (Krompák 2018: 250). While Backhaus (2007: 60) pointed out in the first decade of the new millennium that research on linguistic landscapes cannot develop without a clear quantitative corpus, later studies employ mixed-methods approaches, i.e., a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. This approach also allows for the exploration of narratives regarding the cultural, historical, political, and social background of a specific space hidden behind a sign (Blommaert 2013), as well as the linguistic practices of the individuals involved (Krompák 2018: 250). Shedding light on the human dimension of the phenomenon cannot be achieved through numbers alone. Consequently, a need emerged to orient linguistic landscapes research diachronically, particularly if one aims to understand how a given LL historically developed.

4. LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE RESEARCH IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

In the Czech-speaking context, the first studies that can be assigned to the tradition of linguistic landscapes research appeared only at the beginning of this century, focusing primarily on language management and language contact. Their development follows the trends of international research, which also initially examined LL from a sociolinguistic and sociolinguistic-ecological perspective. In recent years, however, the ethnographic approach has been increasingly adopted in the Czech context.

For instance, the study “Language management in the Czech Republic” by Nekvapil and Neústupný (2003) deals with *Semiotic Landscapes*² in binational and bilingual German-Czech organizations. Methodologically, the study draws on the ethnological approach, based on the assumption that social structures are negotiated and reproduced in the course of interactions. Sloboda et al. (2010) present a comparative analysis of (post)communist Belarus, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, discussing the dialectical relationship between LL and state ideology and offering concepts for investigating this relationship. In another study, Sloboda (2016) devotes his attention to describing super-diversity in the Czech context from both macro- and micro-sociological perspectives. Following studies on multilingualism, Scarvaglieri and Pappenhagen (2018) analyze linguistic practices and attitudes toward languages in two border cities – Biel (Bienne) in Switzerland and Ústí nad Labem in the Czech Republic – using LL. The authors succeed in showing how linguistic practices and attitudes toward languages are similar in both cities by means of LL.

Adopting a qualitative-ethnographic approach in his study, Mácha (2020) addresses conflicts in rural municipalities of the Těšín region that have arisen in the last fifteen years as a result of introducing bilingual Czech-Polish signs. He presents selected findings from longitudinal study research based on an analysis of the LL in the Těšín region, media coverage, and the opinions of locals, municipal leaders, and representatives of Polish organizations, obtained through interviews and questionnaires. Folwarczná (2019) examines the linguistic landscape of the border town Těšín by comparing the occurrence of Czech and Polish LL in the main streets of the Czech and Polish parts of Těšín / Cieszyn. In addition to the relationship between Czech and Polish, she also focuses on the presence of English as a global language. Herold (2018), in his diploma thesis, explores the existing overlap between translation studies and linguistic landscape research. He focuses particularly on the specific characteristics of translations in the linguistic landscape, analyzing the centre of Prague. In his bachelor’s thesis, Váňa (2022) documents the multilingual situation in the public space of Písek based on an ethnographic analysis of LL, drawing on Blommaert’s approach. He collects data on-site and supplements them with research in online resources as well as participant observation. Data collection took place in 2021–2022. The findings offer insights into the life of individual language communities as well as how they are presented or self-presented in the linguistic landscape.

² Studies on linguistic landscapes can also be found in other academic journals such as the *International Journal of Multilingualism*, *International Journal of Sociology and Language*, and *Language Policy*.

Many of the mentioned studies address historical aspects of the topic by “establishing a connection between history and the place of data collection” (Schulze 2018: 6). One example is Frýdl (2020), whose LL research focuses on the linguistic composition of public-space signs and on the multilingualism and translatability of LL texts in connection with the demographic structure of Hrádek nad Nisou³ (German: Grottau; Polish: Gródek nad Nysą) and its surroundings (the presence of German and Polish due to proximity to the Polish and German borders). He pays special attention to how the presence of linguistic minorities is reflected in the linguistic landscape and how the region’s history, tourism, and globalization are manifested in the cityscape.

In recent years, application possibilities of LL in education have also attracted increased interest (e.g., Gorter & Cenoz 2022). Sociolinguistic research is a significant source of inspiration for education – both in terms of themes and methodology. The following section provides a closer look at how the concept of LL is understood in foreign language learning and teaching, outlining its didactic potential and offering examples of LL application in the training of German as a Foreign Language teachers that emphasize the historical perspective and draw parallels with sociolinguistic linguistic landscape research.

5. LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THEIR DIDACTIC POTENTIAL

The didactic potential of LLs for foreign language learning and teaching has been intensely discussed over the past two decades. Numerous theoretical-conceptual and practice-oriented publications have already demonstrated that this concept can provide a wide range of suggestions for both language learning and teaching research, as well as for foreign language classrooms. The thematic scope is diverse, encompassing (inter)cultural learning, historical aspects, language, culture and literature didactics, and language and school language policy (e.g., Backhaus 2006; Gorter 2006; Gorter and Cenoz 2007; Badstübner-Kizik 2015, 2018; Cerri & Jentges 2015; Schiedermaier 2015; Marten & Saagpakk 2017; Janíková 2017, 2018; Krompák 2018; Malinowski, Maxim & Dubreil 2020; Blahak 2023; Eibensteiner 2023). The didactic potential of LL for foreign language learning and teaching was examined in a more comprehensive manner for the first time by Badstübner-Kizik and Janíková (2018), who demonstrate possible directions

³ Instead of the term ‘semiotic landscape’, introduced into the academic discourse by Jaworski and Thurlow (2010), the historically older term ‘linguistic landscape’ is more commonly used in current scientific discussions.

for the development of the linguistic landscape and foreign language didactics research field using application examples and reflections.

The debate on incorporating the concept of LL into (foreign) language teaching was initially conducted from the perspective of promoting language acquisition processes, examining the role of LL in these processes from five different angles: input, pragmatic competence, reading and writing skills, multilingualism, and affective and symbolic factors (Cenoz & Gorter 2008: 272). LLs are also considered with regard to the development of translation or mediation skills, where linguistic landscaping may involve activities to enhance learners' ability to recognize specific lexical, grammatical, and text-functional phenomena – for example, identifying the conspicuous persuasive strategies in an advertising poster.

By now, in line with the evolution of historically oriented linguistic landscape research in sociological and ethnographic contexts, the focus in foreign language education has shifted more toward the cultural aspects and content of foreign language acquisition, highlighting the possibilities that this concept offers for developing cultural awareness and pluricultural competence. LLs reflect different discourses – political or historical in nature – and represent cultural specificities of a particular urban space (Badstübner-Kizik & Hille 2016: 114). Consequently, the use of LL in foreign language teaching is of particular interest in cultural and area studies. This includes didactic concepts suitable for conveying cultural content in the context of modern societies characterized by heterogeneity and diversity. One approach that proves highly applicable here is the concept of *diskursive Landeskunde* (discursive area studies). In this concept, culture is understood as the knowledge about the world shared by people, “which is formed and socially shared in discourses – i.e., in communication about particular objects and phenomena” (Zeuner 2017). Although Zeuner focuses on German as a Foreign and Second Language in an inner-German educational context and primarily aims to foster comprehension and insight into “foreign” discourses among learners with a migration background rooted in different cultures, there are multiple parallels for using LL in DaF (German as a Foreign Language) instruction in non-German-speaking regions. This is because it also seems beneficial for learning processes in these contexts to encourage learners to critically reflect on their own and foreign positions or perspectives (Ciepielewska-Kaczmarek, Jentges & Tammenga-Helmantel 2020: 79). LLs facilitate the attainment of objectives in discursive area studies through the application of necessary methodological principles. Altmayer (2016: 16f.) provides a corresponding list, which, among other things, includes authentic, multi-perspective, and varied texts; taking learners' prior knowledge and experiences seriously;

problem orientation; reflection on cultural patterns; and diverse social forms and open teaching methods.

Aside from the possibility of employing the concept of discursive area studies in foreign language teaching by means of LL, the didactic potential of LL also extends to other areas, which can be exemplified as follows:

1. Promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity and the appreciative handling of multilingualism.
2. Highlighting language and culture contact within a given area, thereby making societal or cultural interactions visible.
3. Providing authentic teaching materials that reflect everyday life.
4. Enhancing discourse competence in a foreign language, understood as “the ability to participate in social dialogue with the aim of representing and
5. potentially modifying one’s own viewpoints, as well as recognizing and engaging with the viewpoints of others” (Schmenk 2005: 80).
6. Linking various subjects such as history, geography, civics, or other (foreign) languages.
7. Fostering inquiry-based learning in foreign language classes as well as in teacher education, where diverse (socio)linguistic and ethnographic research methods (e.g., interviews, diaries, or language-learning narratives) can be implemented.
8. Increasing learners’ motivation (e.g., Janíková 2017). Technological advances play a key role here by facilitating the documentation and exploration of LL using digital cameras and cell phones (Marten & Saagpakk 2017: 11) and by enabling the integration of virtual LL.

6. LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPING IN BRNO

The following section illustrates how LL can be utilized in learning and studying German as a Foreign Language. The geographic coordinates are based in the city of Brno (Brünn⁴), an urban area in the Czech Republic that has historically been inhabited by speakers of different languages. Czech and German cultures, as well as the Czech and German languages, have been closely intertwined here

⁴ This is a Czech town in the Liberec district. It is located in the Zittau Basin on the edge of the Zittau Mountains, about twenty kilometers northwest of Liberec and six kilometers southeast of Zittau, near the German-Czech-Polish tri-border area. The town was predominantly populated by Germans until the mid-20th century, and a Czech school was only established here in 1925. After the end of World War II, the majority of the original inhabitants were expelled (see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hr%C3%A1dek_nad_Nisou).

for centuries. In this context, the *Spot German* approach – searching for German language elements in public spaces to use them for teaching purposes – proves especially suitable (Marten & Saagpak 2017). The theoretical framework is provided by Blommaert's concept (2013), outlined above, which views LLs as signs constituting the multifaceted background of a specific, also historically cultural, space.

In recent years, I have addressed linguistic landscaping as a teaching method in several courses. Students collected LL in languages other than Czech and discussed their functions, the authors' motives, and their anchoring in historical and contemporary social contexts. Nonetheless, the focus was on documenting those image-text combinations in which German-language traces or references to the German-speaking world are discernible. Admittedly, quantitative perspectives did not play a role in this process.

So far, these project-based LL activities have convincingly shown that the German language and various facets of Czech-German coexistence in the city's history are still visible today in multiple LL forms – for instance, on commemorative plaques, monuments, inscriptions on private, commercial, and institutional buildings, or on gravestones in cemeteries or churches, on posters or flyers, in / on public transport, or on information boards. For example, the following LLs point to (a) a literary figure symbolizing the interconnectedness of Czech and Austrian cultural life in a specific historical context (Figure 1) and (b) the painful World War II and immediate post-war period in Brno (Figures 2–3).

Over time, a wide range of topics has emerged, offering a more specific insight into the linguistic landscape of Brno. At the same time, various teaching scenarios with concrete objectives were created, discussed, and reflected upon.



Figure 1. Robert Musil commemorative plaque on Jaselská Street in Brno

Source: photograph by Michal Klajban.



Figure 2. Memorial for displaced Germans, Mendel Square, Brno

Source: photograph by Ivo Šťastný.

AM 30. MAI 1945 MUSSTEN DIE DEUTSCHEN AUS BRÜNN UND DER SPRACHINSEL IHRE HEIMAT VERLASSEN. MÖGEN IN ZUKUNFT ALLE MENSCHEN IN EUROPA IN FRIEDEN UND UNTER ACHTUNG DER MENSCHENRECHTE LEBEN. ERRICHTET VOM HEIMATVERBAND DER BRÜNNER BRUNA IM MAI 1995. anquetil, velt	30. KVĚTNA 1945 MUSELI NĚMCI Z BRNA A OKOLÍ OPUSTIT SVOU DOMOVINU. KĚŽ V BUDOUCNOSTI VŠICHNI LIDÉ V EVROPĚ MOHOU ŽÍT V MÍRU A S ÚCTOU K LIDSKÝM PRÁVŮM. ZŘÍZENO DOMOVSKÝM SPOLKEM BRŇANŮ BRUNA V KVĚTNU 1995.
AM 30. MAI 1945 MUSSTEN DIE DEUTSCHEN AUS BRÜNN UND DER SPRACHINSEL IHRE HEIMAT VERLASSEN. MÖGEN IN ZUKUNFT ALLE MENSCHEN IN EUROPA IN FRIEDEN UND UNTER ACHTUNG DER MENSCHEN- RECHTE LEBEN. ERICHTET VOM HEIMAT- VERBAND DER BRÜNNER BRUNA IM MAI 1995.	30. KVĚTNA 1945 MUSELI NĚMCI Z BRNA A OKOLÍ OPUSTIT SVOU DOMOVINU. KĚŽ V BUDOUCNOSTI VŠICHNI LIDÉ V EVROPĚ MOHU ŽÍT V MÍRU A S ÚCTOU K LIDSKÝM PRÁVŮM. ZŘÍZENO DOMOVSKÝM SPOLKEM BRŇANŮ BRUNA V KVĚTNU 1995.

Figure 3. Memorial for displaced Germans, Mendel Square, Brno

Source: photograph by Ivo Šťastný.

Group discussions were used for these reflections (Riemer 2016: 166). The results confirm the didactic potential of LL for cultivating culturally sensitive German language learning in this particular urban context (cf. Janíková 2017, 2018). In group discussions, the following benefits related to cultural learning objectives in LL-based instruction were primarily highlighted:

1. Expansion of cultural-historical knowledge – in this case, in a region where two languages (Czech and German) and two cultures (Czech and German) coexisted for centuries.
2. Gaining deeper insight into how history and culture are constructed.
3. Contributing to a better understanding of the often complicated historical socio-political developments in this urban area in the context of Czech-German coexistence.
4. Providing opportunities to better understand history, including one's own.
5. Stimulating interest in current relations between the Czech majority population and the German minority, i.e., whether and how this minority is established (or has been established).
6. Allowing for the development of "a critical distance and the ability to look beyond specific phenomena and cases" (Badstübner-Kizik 2016: 33).

Based on their own experiences with this concept, students expressed interest in using LL in their own teaching practice to motivate their pupils to learn German (cf. Janíková 2024). In general, they reflected on which aspects of LL could be integrated into their teaching and how these authentic materials could be transformed into didactic resources. This is evident from master's theses examining, for example, the effectiveness of the linguistic landscape concept in the context of DaF instruction in schools through action research (e.g., Svobodová 2024).

7. CONCLUSION

Language in urban areas and in various locations has been attracting researchers' attention for several decades. They strive to investigate and interpret the contexts, messages, meanings, or purposes of these linguistic signs. This has led to the establishment of a new field – linguistic landscape research – which is sociolinguistically oriented and has been developing dynamically at the international level. This evolution not only expands traditional research objectives but also establishes new methodological approaches. In this context, interest in applying LL in education, i.e., in the classroom, has been growing. Overall, it can be stated that in recent years, especially the application possibilities and

challenges of LL approaches in foreign language teaching have gained significance in linguistic landscape research (cf. Ziegler & Marten 2021: 21), with sociolinguistic research providing inspiration.

Existing findings from linguistic landscape research and specialist discussions on the use of LL in foreign language instruction offer compelling evidence that LL can provide fresh impulses for foreign language learning and teaching and boasts great potential in language didactics. By integrating LL thematically into the classroom, one can more intensively promote language awareness, i.e., the ability to deal with language(s) in a reflective manner and to recognize differences at various linguistic levels. Concurrently, cultural awareness is also strengthened. Regarding specific teaching methods, working with LL provides new impulses for implementing inquiry-based learning, fostering critical thinking, and enhancing discourse competence. New (digital) technologies offer numerous ways to document LL and explore it further.

Depending on the concrete objectives as well as on spaces and locations, linguistic landscaping in classroom settings can address or emphasize different perspectives, aspects, and approaches that also matter in sociolinguistically oriented LL research. As a teaching method, linguistic landscaping offers a broad thematic spectrum for a specific target group in a certain cultural learning context - one that is grounded in learners' real-life experiences. At the same time, it provides a wealth of often not immediately apparent information on the political, linguistic, economic, social, religious, and other circumstances of a region, thereby significantly contributing to cross-curricular and culturally sensitive language instruction.

Based on the above explanations and examples, it can be inferred that a focused and purposeful connection between foreign language didactic linguistic landscape research and sociolinguistic research can substantially enrich the application of LL in foreign language teaching.

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Received: 28.10.2025; revised: 12.02.2026

Krajobrazy językowe z perspektywy badań socjolingwistycznych i nauczania języków obcych w Republice Czeskiej

ABSTRAKT. Artykuł bada potencjał włączenia socjolingwistycznej koncepcji krajobrazu językowego do nauczania języków obcych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem jej przydatności jako cennego dodatkowego źródła w edukacji językowej. Po zdefiniowaniu ram krajobrazu językowego i podsumowaniu aktualnych dyskusji teoretycznych i metodologicznych artykuł przedstawia zwięzły przegląd rozwoju tej rozległej dziedziny socjolingwistyki, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem statusu takich badań w kontekście czeskim. Następnie analiza skupia się na implikacjach dydaktycznych, bada przydatność krajobrazu językowego w nauczaniu języków obcych. Na podstawie przykładów i własnego doświadczenia dydaktycznego autorka pokazuje praktyczne zastosowania krajobrazu językowego w nauczaniu języka niemieckiego jako języka obcego, zarówno w kształceniu nauczycieli, jak i w praktyce szkolnej w środowisku miejskim w Brnie w Czechach.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: krajobraz językowy, badania, socjolingwistyka, nauczanie języków obcych, nauczanie języka niemieckiego jako języka obcego.

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