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Polish as an Element of the Linguistic Landscape of the Specific Urban Space of Ostrava

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ABSTRACT: The subject of observation and subsequent analysis is primarily a static approach to examining the linguistic landscape (LL), focusing on public signs and spoken (audio) announcements in Polish recorded by the author in the form of photographs and audio recordings within the city of Ostrava, specifically at the Poruba Outdoor Swimming Pool. The author's aim was to assess how language reflects the broader context of the development of ethnicity and current language dynamics. Therefore, a qualitative approach to the linguistic material was also of interest, with the goal of diagnosing, understanding and comparing indicators of LL in relation to several thematic areas – tourism, Czech merchants' and service providers' communication with customers in Polish and the LL in the city in general. The interest was also in the hierarchy of linguistic messages, their placement and whether they are monolingual, polyphonic or mixed.

KEYWORDS: linguistic landscape; the Polish language; language contact; communication; Ostrava.

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One of the relatively new research directions focusing on the functioning of language in the everyday lives of its users is the linguistic landscape.[1] In a broader sense, the term *linguistic landscape* (LL) refers to the representation of languages in public and commercial graphic signage within a given locality – such as inscriptions on government and municipal buildings, street and square names, traffic signs, billboards, posters, advertisements, and commercial signs on shops and service establishments [Landry, Bourhis 1997: 25]. From this list, it is evident that these specific signs can be categorized as permanent (e.g., traffic signs, shop signs, permanent advertising boards, monuments, etc.), occasional (e.g., posters, temporary messages in shop windows, minor public notices, etc.), and noise (e.g., random messages, etc.) [Blommaert 2022: 64–65].

In the concept of the LL, the term *linguistic message* or *linguistic sign* appears, but in a sense different from the traditional structuralist metalinguistic understanding. It refers to the manifestation of language in graphic or auditory form – a (typically brief and concise) verbal transmission of information serving the aforementioned purposes. A sign defined in this way, as an important element of the LL, provides information about the ethnic composition of a given area, delineates boundaries between linguistic and cultural communities, reflects local social relations, mirrors the language situation in the region, and corresponds to the language policy of local institutions and, to a large extent, to the general policy of the state in which the municipality (town, village) is located. Beyond their basic informative function, these messages also carry important symbolic meaning and play a key role in shaping the identity of individuals or groups living in the area, as the presence or absence of a particular language in the environment increases or decreases the social prestige of its users [Černý 2016: 51; Góral 2011: 43–44; Landry, Bourhis 1997].

The aforementioned linguistic/textual signs in public space are analysed, among other things, in accordance with the methodology applied in LL research [Backhaus 2005; 2006; 2007]. Based on this method, they can be categorized according to linguistic features into the following types:

 a) monolingual – the content of the linguistic sign is expressed in a single language,

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1 In some studies on the linguistic landscape, the term *linguistic cityscape* also appears, which is sometimes used as synonymous with *linguistic landscape*. However, the latter term is not limited to urban spaces, where such micro-messages are much more numerous than in rural areas. *Linguistic landscape* is therefore a broader term than *linguistic cityscape* [Stolac, Hlavač 2021: 14]. In some works, we even encounter the term *soundscape* to refer to auditory messages and communication in public space.

    b) polyphonic – the same content is expressed in at least two languages (most often L1 and L2),

    c) mixed – linguistic signs are expressed in at least two languages, but the content of the inscriptions is not identical [Geben 2022][2].

From a different perspective, linguistic signs can be divided into public and/or private signs. This method of examining the LL focuses on both the *top-down* sphere, i.e., public, official signs, and the *bottom-up* sphere, i.e., private, unofficial signs, which often appear spontaneously as messages in public space. Unlike government authorities and institutions, these are published by private individuals, companies, shops, restaurants, etc. The latter group of linguistic signs typically responds to current events [Gorter 2006; 2012]. Furthermore, signs can be differentiated based on their primarily informational, commemorative, or artistic functions [Geben 2022], signs with varying levels of (in)formality and durability, or exposure – texts related to a particular place, or mobile texts [Makowska 2022: 129]. In the categorization of LL, other complex and qualitative aspects of the sociolinguistic landscape can also be applied, as discussed, among others, by Blommaert [2022: 119] – the semiotic and spatial scope of the LL, changes and transformations, sociolinguistic stratification, and so on.[3]

Before we move on to the recorded examples, we will outline the linguistic situation in the city of Ostrava, as it differs significantly from that in other parts of the Czech Republic. A linguistic situation, as is well known, can be defined as the set of language codes available in a given area and used by a particular community depending on the communicative context. In Ostrava, various languages and their varieties have coexisted (and still coexist): Czech (in both standard and colloquial forms), German, Polish, the Lachian dialect, the Ostrava urban speech, and a number of sociolects related to mining or metallurgical communities [Muryc 2024a: 105]. Despite the geographical and "mental" proximity to Poland and the neighbouring bilingual region of Zaolzie (the Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia), Polish is rarely used in Ostrava. Today, Ostrava is a monolingual

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2 This can be supplemented by the taxonomy of signs developed by Mechthild Reh [2004], whose approach distinguishes three types of organization of multilingual information: a) signs in which all the languages used convey the same content, b) signs in which the different language versions of the text partially differ in content, c) signs in which the different language versions differ completely in content. The history and other possibilities of interdisciplinary examination of the linguistic landscape can also be found in the works of, among others: Blommaert [2013; 2022]; Scollon, Scollon [2003]; Stolac, Hlavač [2021].

3 Another categorization and typology of linguistic signs, in addition to their basic function, is offered by Romanowski [2024: 62–63], among other things, with regard to types of discourse or by Charciarek [2023], with a focus on Polish and Czech public signs, their stylistic features and pragmatic aspects.

city; in official public communication, the standard variety of the Czech language is used, or alternatively, general Czech with certain regional dialectal influences (especially in terms of pronunciation), which is often described as Czech "designed" to function as standard. Additionally, it should be noted that similar regional features are also present in the Czech language in other parts of the country.

One of the aspects worth considering when analysing the Polish language in Ostrava's LL is tourism. Numerous tourists from nearby Poland eagerly visit the city, sightseeing or visiting the zoo, and making use of various services. It is precisely because of them that an increasing number of Polish-language signs are appearing in public spaces. Statistics show that, for example, in the first quarter of 2024, over eight thousand Poles stayed overnight in Ostrava.[4] Ostrava is not a traditional tourist city and, in this regard, cannot compete with other places in the Czech Republic. However, it does have two main attractions that are even listed among the ten most visited tourist sites in the Czech Republic:[5] Lower Vítkovice (Czech: *Dolní oblast Vítkovice*) – a national cultural monument of the Czech Republic, a site of global uniqueness comprising a former ironworks area with a complex of industrial buildings, which includes three interconnected industrial facilities: a coal mine, a coking plant, and a blast furnace; Ostrava Zoo (Czech: *Zoologická zahrada a botanický park Ostrava*), which enjoys particular popularity among Polish tourists as well [Muryc 2024b: 60].

The entire city of Ostrava had previously been included in the research.[6] In addition to the urban space (streets, squares) in the city center (in the Moravská Ostrava and Přívoz district), the focus was primarily on places expected to have higher tourist traffic – Lower Vítkovice (the Science and Technology Center, the National Museum of Agriculture), tourist information centers (on Nádražní Street and in the tower of the New Town Hall of Ostrava), the Polish House, the building of the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Ostrava, the zoo, and the Poruba Outdoor Swimming Pool. Several dozen signs (texts) in Polish or containing elements of the Polish language were observed. In most cases, these were polyphonic signs, in which the same content was expressed

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4   Data available on the "MSTourism" organization's website: https://www.mstourism.cz/media
     /statistiky/ [accessed: 6 May 2025]. According to the statistics, in the first quarter of 2024,
     over 8,672 overnight stays were provided to visitors from Poland in tourist facilities. Poles
     rank second among foreign visitors, after Slovaks, with 9,196 Slovaks staying in Ostrava
     during the same period.

5   See the statistical data from the organization "CzechTourism": https://tourdata.cz/english
     /number-of-vistors-to-tourist-attractions-in-2023/ [accessed: 6 May 2025].

6   We have addressed this topic earlier – see: Muryc 2024a; 2024b.

in both Czech and Polish. Significantly fewer signs could be classified as monolingual (Polish) or mixed.

The aim of this text is to present several aspects of LL research using the example of a somewhat specific space of the Poruba Outdoor Swimming Pool (Czech: *Letní koupaliště Poruba*)[7] – a public swimming pool area located on the border of Ostrava's Poruba district and the municipality of Vřesina. During the summer season, it is one of the most frequently visited public places in Ostrava. It is an open space accessible upon purchasing an entry ticket. The presence of the Polish language at the swimming pool area was analysed from a synchronic perspective, using current field observation data from 2023–2024. The focus includes both written signs and spoken (audio) messages in Polish, recorded by the author of this article and documented in the form of photographs and audio recordings. The photographs capture Polish-language signs typically displayed on the exterior of buildings.

The first place where the summer public swimming pool administration interacts with the customer and where pool guests typically receive the most important information regarding the rules for using the facility is the three entrance gates. On two of the smaller (side) gates, there is information intended exclusively for Polish clients. It is a monolingual sign: *Zakaz grillowania na terenie obiektu* (English: *No grilling on the premises*). It can be assumed that the reason for placing such a text is the observed tendency of Polish people to engage in this activity in public places, which is not advisable, and this information does not need to be communicated to other pool guests. At the same time, one might interpret the installation of a sign containing information only in Polish as a form of stigmatization of Polish visitors (see Figure 1).

At the swimming pool area, one can also encounter an interesting example of a mixed linguistic sign. While the version intended for Czech-speaking audiences uses the polite phrase *Vážení zákazníci* (Polish: *Szanowni klienci* / English: *Dear costumers*) and the word *Děkujeme* (Polish: *Dziękujemy!* / English: *Thank you!*), the Polish-language formulation is simpler and stylistically less polite (see Figure 2).

A similar mixed message has been placed at the entrance to the public swimming pool area for vehicles. The information in Czech (*Vjezd jen pro zaměstnance a stánkaře s platným povolením*, Polish: *Wejście tylko dla pracowników i właścicieli stoisk z ważnym zezwoleniem* / English: *Entry only for employees and stallholders with a valid permit*) is relatively detailed and complements

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7   For details see the Poruba Outdoor Swimming Pool website https://www.sareza.cz/areal/letni-koupaliste-poruba [accessed: 6 May 2025].

Fig. 1   One of the entrance gates to the
         swimming area
Source: author's archive.

Fig. 2   Information posted on one of
         the volleyball courts
Source: author's archive.

the universal road sign. The text in Polish, however, is limited to a brief state-
ment: *tylko dla pracowników* (English: *only for employees*). On one hand, this
is a simplified summary; on the other hand, the road sign clearly indicates how
the driver should behave. This sign is a typical example of a multimodal sign.
Linguistic landscapes are made up of a variety of semiotic modes, including
not only written language but also visual elements such as images, logos, and
symbols. These modes interact in complex ways to construct meaning in pub-
lic spaces (see Figure 3).

   While in the cases of the given examples of bilingual signage, the text in Pol-
ish does not typically show linguistic errors, in spontaneous bottom-up mes-
sages, numerous mistakes can be observed, usually caused by interference (neg-
ative transfers) from the Czech language. Examples of messages with linguistic
errors include, for instance, bilingual English-Polish announcements: *We accept
credit card – Akceptujemy karta kreditowa*, a Czech-Polish message for drivers
in a parking lot: *Obsazeno – Pelne* (English: *Occupied*), and a Czech-Polish sign
prohibiting the removal of glassware from the restaurant: *Zákaz vynášení skla
mimo restauraci – Zakaz zabierania szkła zewnątrz restauracji* (see Figure 4).

   In addition to the aforementioned unofficial signs, the municipal centre
managing sports and recreation facilities in Ostrava (*Sareza*) has placed all the
most important information not only in Czech and English but also in Polish.

Fig. 3   Multimodal sign at the
        entrance to the public
        swimming pool area
Source: author's archive.

Fig. 4   Example of a language
        error in a bottom-up
        message
Source: author's archive.

The official informational signs installed in the public swimming pool area are therefore usually trilingual, e.g., *Kouření v areálu je povoleno jen na místech k tomu určených! – Smoking is allowed only in designated smoking areas! – Palenie na terenie dozwolone jest tylko w miejscach do tego przeznaczonych!* at the entrance to the swimming area. By the pool, for example, there is a sign: *Nestřežená část / Střežená část – Unguarded section / Guarded section – Sekcja niestrzeżona / Sekcja strzeżona*, and elsewhere: *Místo pro kouření – Smoking area – Miejsce do palenia* – with the Polish wording not being entirely correct regarding the designation of the area intended for that activity (see Figure 5).

A specific form of linguistic communication in the city's landscape is the oral message, sometimes referred to as a *soundscape*. We have collected material containing polyphonic audio announcements produced by a speaker and broadcast via the public address system, also at the public swimming pool area, where one can encounter such recordings in Polish. These messages were announced by a native speaker of Polish without any noticeable influence from the Czech language. Two such messages have been transcribed according to orthographic norms:

1. *Szanowni klienci, prosimy o zwracanie ważnej uwagi na swoje rzeczy osobiste. Kosztowności można przechować w szatni, w pomieszczeniach wypożyczalni*

sprzętów sportowych koło boisk do siatkówki plażowej. Życzymy Państwu przyjemnego pobytu w kompleksie letniego kąpieliska Sareza.

2. *Szanowni klienci, pozwalamy sobie zwrócić Państwa uwagę na zakaz palenia w całym kompleksie poza wydzielonymi i oznaczonymi miejscami. Życzymy Państwu przyjemnego pobytu na letnim kąpielisku Sareza.*

Fig. 5   Example of official trilingual information posted by the facility administrator

Source: author's archive.

Summarizing the observations regarding the presence of the Polish language in the LL of Ostrava, we find that polyphonic signs appear most frequently (usually in Czech, English, and Polish; the use of English and Polish is sometimes interchangeable). In cases where the message is clearly directed at a Polish-speaking audience, monolingual signs are used. The same applies to prohibitions or instructions intended exclusively for Poles, aimed at preventing undesirable behaviour (e.g., a ban on grilling). Mixed linguistic signs can be considered those in which the content of the messages is not identical. The quality of the language in the messages varies; interference errors influenced by the Czech language occur especially in unofficial (bottom-up) messages. It is worth emphasizing the positive impact of institutional cooperation with speakers for whom the language of the message is their native tongue.

In our analysis, we were able to distinguish several layers and aspects of the LL which, in addition to the aforementioned multimodality, demonstrate that linguistic and visual elements in LL can index certain social relationships or identities. For example, the use of different languages may suggest a hierarchy among ethnic groups and language communities, signal which linguistic or ethnic group dominates a particular space, or indicate which values and norms are considered

dominant within that community. Moreover, LL is closely tied to specific social, historical, and political contexts. Language signs in streets, city names, public advertisements, etc., are not neutral – they can carry historical, cultural, and political meanings. Finally, it should be noted that linguistic expressions in LL are not static but subject to change, especially under the influence of globalization and migration. As the demographic structure of the population changes or global communication channels expand, the LL may also transform. New languages, symbols, and visual elements can be introduced, reflecting changes in the cultural and social character of a given space [Blommaert 2013; Scollon, Scollon 2003].

Public space is filled with various types of signs and messages – traffic signs, advertisements, flyers, billboards, posters, shop, restaurant, and institutional signs. These messages are placed with the purpose of conveying specific information to the recipient, who is most often a random passerby, and they can be interpreted as a reflection of the linguistic and cultural situation of a given community. The content and form of these micro-texts are adapted to the community's needs, which contributes to the unique, recognizable character of the space. For some time now, we have been observing new forms of the Polish language becoming established in Ostrava. They are the result of increased tourist traffic and the strong interest of Poles in what the city has to offer.

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