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Commodifying Minority Languages: Slovene and (Burgenland) Croatian in Austria

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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to examine the extent to which and in what contexts Slovene and Croatian, as minority languages in Austria, are used in local branding and promotion. Working within a framework of the sociolinguistics of tourism and recognising that language is inherently interwoven in all tourism-related activities, we take an ethnographic methodological approach to analysing the linguistic landscape. We combine this with multimodal discourse analysis in order to grasp the multiple ways in which local communities employ and rely on language commodification.

Historical Background

Slovene and Burgenland Croatian are two minority languages in Austria. Slovene dates back to the Slavic tribes who settled in large parts of present-day Austria in the early Middle Ages; Croatian is present in eastern Austria as a result of the peasant populations migration from Croatia and Bosnia in the sixteenth century. However, German was stipulated as the state language in the constitution of the Republic of Austria in 1929. Although the State Treaties of St. Germain (1919) and Vienna (1955) granted the Burgenland Croats and the Carinthian Slovenes rights regarding the public use and visibility of their languages, it was with great reluctance that they were implemented in the twentieth century. Indeed, they were sometimes violently denied – especially in Carinthia. This led to the almost complete absence of Croatian and Slovene in the linguistic landscape (LL) of Austria by the beginning of the twenty-first

century, both in official signage and in commercial and private inscriptions. Recently, however, the political climate and perceptions of the written presence of Croatian and Slovene in public have changed (cf. Doleschal 2023, Jordan et al. 2021, Rasinger 2014, Tyran 2022). The question therefore arises as to whether such changes have also had an impact on the role of these languages in promotion and commercial product branding.

Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

Tourism is one of the most powerful contemporary forces through which the global economy is reflected in local contexts. The increasing interest in the sociolinguistics of tourism (Thurlow/Jaworski 2010) stems from the recognition that language is inherent in all tourism-related activities. Although language and communicative competence have long been considered key ingredients in the provision of services to tourists (cf. e.g. Cameron 2000), interest in the role of language and discourse in the promotion and branding of particular places, spaces, and products started to attract interest more recently (e.g., Thurlow/Jaworski 2010). This applies, for instance, to the potential of different linguistic systems or codes to discursively construct a particular place as a tourist site, thereby presenting it as more authentic and worth visiting. In this sense, multilingual contexts could demonstrate the interrelationship between language and the economy.

Bourdieu (1977) examined the role of language as a form of social capital and compared communication to economic exchange, in which linguistic codes function as products to be invested in or exchanged on the market. The economic nature of such exchanges lies in the symbolic relationship established between markets and actors who possess particular linguistic or cultural capital with a particular value. Competence in prestigious languages and linguistic varieties, as well as in languages employed in economic exchanges, therefore tends to be considered capital. Minority languages may also have high economic value.

We approach this transformation from a symbolic to an economic resource through the concept of *commodification* (Heller 2003: 2010). The commodification of initially immaterial resources is based on the inherent characteristic of (minority) languages to enable a specifically local experience of a certain place/space (Coupland 2003). Examples of how languages and culture are

commodified could be found not only in tourism but also in marketing, product branding and other economic activities aimed at generating profits by 'selling' authenticity (Dlaske 2014: 2015). For this reason, the increasing visibility of minority languages and cultures has assumed importance in local tourist branding. The use of minority languages in public spaces could be more attractive for tourists than monolingual signs precisely because they contribute to the 'authentic' experience of a place (Thurlow/Jaworski 2010, Gorter/Marten/Van Mensel 2019, Hogan-Brun/O'Rourke 2019, Škevin Rajko / Šimičić 2020). The linguistic inscription is therefore potentially transformed into economic capital and commodified. At the same time, it could be a relevant factor in the maintenance of minority languages and a means of economic and cultural sustainability among local communities (e.g. Pietikäinen/Kelly-Holmes 2011).

Methods and Materials

In collecting the data for our project, we followed a mixed-methods approach, combining the documentation of data on the visibility of languages in the LL, including in the virtual space, with ethnographic fieldwork and interviews.

Our research in Carinthia focused on the LL of various tourism-related institutions in the bilingual area (e.g., campsites, the municipality of Finkenstein/Bekštanj, the Bilingual College for Higher Vocational Education with a thematic focus on tourism and catering in St. Peter/Šentpeter, the municipality of Schiefeling/Škofiče, the municipality of Eisenkappel/Železna Kapla, a Slovenian-owned restaurant, and the Slovenian Urban Jarnik Ethnographic Institute in Klagenfurt/Celovec). We also collected some printed material related to touristic topics in the bilingual area. To gain insights into perceptions of the Slovene language among different stakeholders, we conducted interviews with selected activists and entrepreneurs.

The research group collected material on Croatian in Burgenland during field trips to Neudorf / Novo Selo, and to two communities in the Eisenstadt/Željezno region, namely Trausdorf/Trajštof and Oslip/Uzlop. We documented the visibility of Croatian in the LL, supplementing the information by conducting background interviews with local language activists as well as collecting printed materials and information on the company's web presence.

Results and Discussion – Slovene in Carinthia

The Slovene language is rarely present in the LL of Southern Carinthia. This applies to official topographical and tourist signs as well as private signage. For the most part, its presence in tourism-related signs and materials is attributable to officially supported projects financed by the EU or the regional government, or initiated by UNESCO. One example is the cross-border project “UNESCO global Geopark Karawanken/Karavanke” in Eisenkappel/Železna kapla, where all relevant written materials are bilingual German-Slovene. This was a deliberate case of tourism branding, as stated in an interview.

Among the campsites, only 8.67% of the signs contained at least one word in Slovene, half of these being only single words (e.g., the bilingual name of the campsite or the Slovene equivalent of a topographical name, see Fig. 1). Only one of the five campsites is owned by Carinthian Slovenes and has a bilingual name: *Camping Rosental-Rož*. This is prominently present in the logo that appears on printed materials and stickers and could be interpreted as an example of branding. Otherwise, we found few signs containing Slovene at this campsite. Generally, the campsite owners and managers would prefer to use pictograms because of the limited space they had for written information – as these should be universally understandable. Thus, the interviewees considered linguistic capital only in terms of the communicative function of language.

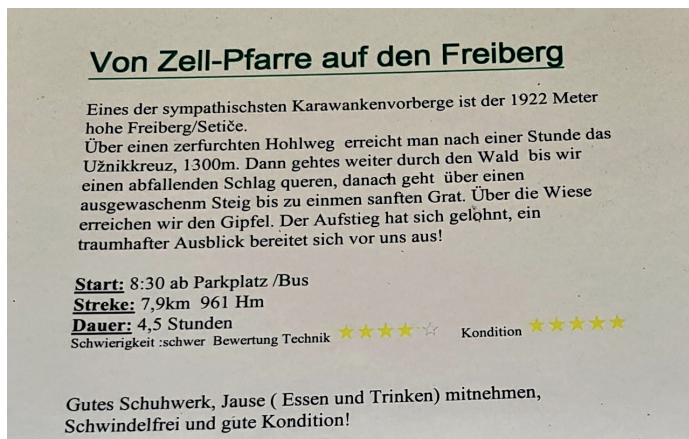


Fig. 1: Flyer advertising a walking tour, with Slovene in the bilingual name of the destination (Freiberg/Setiče)

Interestingly, the bilingual restaurateur in Klagenfurt/Celovec had a more positive attitude towards the role of Slovene in his field: he emphasised the atmosphere that the language created for his guests. This is an emerging understanding in the commodification of language. Visually, however, the Slovene language does not appear as prominently as German. In contrast, the Bilingual College for Higher Vocational Education in St. Peter/Šentpeter follows a policy of consistently using both languages, including in its visual appearance: almost all signs are in both Slovene and German. The teachers at this educational facility recognised the benefit of Slovene for tourist purposes. Receiving an economics degree in two languages offers their graduates additional qualifications and access to a wider labour market. Again, this recognition of the economic value of language refers to its communicative function.

We documented the rare use of Slovene in branding in a farm shop in the village of Hart/Ločilo near Finkenstein/Bekštanj. A local bilingual family labels their products bilingually in German and Slovene and uses some Slovene in their folders. They saw this as the promotion of Slovene, i.e., an act of identity expression rather than an economic advantage.

Results and Discussion – Croatian in Burgenland

Our research in all three municipalities in Burgenland revealed the importance of individual language activists in promoting the visibility of minority languages in general. The main motivations and stimuli were at least three-fold: (1) increasing the visibility of minority languages in the public space as a reaction to the rather shallow macro-political understanding of the concept of topography; (2) documenting Croatian toponyms and hodonyms in local contexts; and (3) branding the municipalities as bilingual spaces. However, such branding is not necessarily to be understood as commodification, as the driving force behind it is certainly not primarily economic. It is rather a marker of identity, i.e. symbolic. Nevertheless, in the three municipalities studied, bilingual tourist information was also present in the documented material, German being dominant.

Trausdorf/Trajštof has made further inroads in this direction. A bilingual art trail along the Wulka river and a bilingual nature trail were documented in the community centre, further branding Trausdorf/Trajštof as bilingual.

Such branding was also observable on the micro level of individual entrepreneurs and businesses. Here, the use of Croatian indicates either uniqueness and authenticity and/or a minority identity, also drawing on colloquial and translingual language practices. However, the businesses experienced divided reactions from their consumers, including a lack of understanding and negative attitudes towards Slavic graphemes. On the other hand, some consumers from different Slavic linguistic contexts highlighted the positive effect of using Croatian, a language perceived as a common 'Slavic' form of communication.

Conclusion

The commodification of Slovene and Croatian differs: Slovene in Carinthia is present in tourism-related signs and materials predominantly as a result of officially supported projects, whereas Croatian has been introduced into the linguistic landscape of Burgenland rather by individual language activists and in grassroots initiatives (Tyran 2025). In Burgenland, we also saw the more individual branding of places and products through the use of Croatian as a minority language. In both contexts, we found that the minority language could be considered linguistic capital in terms of its communicative and symbolic functions.

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