



# Linguistic Landscape of Football. Reterritorialization in a Minority Setting

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**Abstract.** Football has been related to various fields of linguistics, and linguistic landscape (LL) research is no exception. The study examines how football fans in a linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse region claim the club and the stadium as their own space in the process of reterritorialization (Monaghan 2020), due to numerous linguistic and semiotic resources. The research site is a Hungarian minority context in the public space of a football stadium in Sfântu Gheorghe, Romania. The linguistic landscape of football in Sfântu Gheorghe has never been explored in depth before. The study draws on a corpus based on photographs, videos taken inside and outside of the stadium, and data collected from the social media. The analysis shows that the presence of Hungarian in this particular LL indexes collective identity and describes the positioning strategies of the Hungarian minority speakers. The study also explores the processes of identity negotiation in which they are engaged.

**Keywords:** linguistic landscape, semiotic landscape, language policy, ethnic minority

## 1. Introduction

It is Friday night. As I am trying to drive into the city where I live, I am blocked by waves of traffic, cars full of people, leaving a newly built football stadium after a match day. It is a game day, a national football event, with banners, flags, adverts in and outside of the stadium. We usually assume that sport, in particular football, is only a game and a competition. What if there is more to tell than scoring a goal?

Football in its global context (Giulianotti and Robertson 2009) has various connections with different areas of linguistics. The main concern, probably, has been the language of football from its terminology to register. However, in recent years, more and more studies deal with the language choice of players

and coaches (Lavric and Steiner 2018), ethnicity and diversity discourses of the fans (Kytölä 2017), identity issues in the football stadiums, etc. (Del Percio 2015, Gibbons 2011). Football is therefore closely linked to sociolinguistic and discourse phenomena, and linguistic landscape is no exception. Studies have already drawn particular attention on symbolic space construction (Monaghan 2020). Not surprisingly, for the home team, the stadium is the familiar, *holy ground*, while for the visitors it is the unknown, danger-filled, agonizing *hell* (Péter 2010: 21). This space is a public one and open for meaning-making, which builds up the linguistic landscape of football, with all the processes and states of “becoming undone” through “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 – qtd. in Monaghan 2020: 177). To follow up this enquiry, it is important to know what linguistic and semiotic resources are present in the landscape and how they contribute to the construction of local ethnic identity. The study seeks answers to the following research questions: what linguistic and semiotic resources are used in a football stadium to construct the ethnic minority identity and how reterritorialization takes place in this public space.

The paper is structured as follows: in the first part, I outline the theoretical perspectives by emphasizing the need for a semiotic approach in linguistic landscape research. Public space is a central notion in linguistic landscape studies, and this time is no different, as I focus on stadiums as such, unravelling the relationship between football and linguistic landscape research. The paper will further expand on the concept of reterritorialization and settle it in the context of a bilingual, minority situation. This will be followed by a description of data and data collection procedures, where the most important aim was to capture the diverse offline and online resources produced and used by fans, as private agents, and by the club, as an official, corporate one. Data analysis includes a description of the football club. It is followed by an analysis of identity construction based on the linguistic and semiotic resources as elements of the linguistic landscape of football in an ethnic minority context. Special emphasis is placed on the linguistic display of conflicting discourses between fans, which seems indispensable for the reterritorialization of this public space. Finally, after the discussion and concluding remarks, suggestions for further research extending the objectives of LL research within football are formulated.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives

### 2.1. A semiotic approach to linguistic landscape

Early linguistic landscape studies were influenced by the initial definition of Landry and Bourhis (1997). They focused on the visibility of languages on

signs in public spaces, and they commonly contributed to the interpretation of differences between official top-down and private bottom-up signs, for example, commercial and place-name signs located in urban areas. These studies attempted to describe how linguistic landscapes mirror the language situation of a certain area (Shohamy and Gorter 2009). There has been a further aim to understand the informative and symbolic functions of linguistic signs (Gorter et al. 2021) in order “to link publicly displayed – or emplaced – discourse to some aspects of the sociolinguistic reality of the place” (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010: 10). Undeniably, signs convey not only linguistic but sociocultural meanings, which are always constructed in the act of socio-cultural interpretation. They are connected to language policy and framed within geopolitical boundaries (Scollon and Scollon 2003).

With the rapid expansion of the field, different “scapes” have been investigated to cover other questions related to multilingualism such as dominance of languages, language policies, etc. (see Shohamy and Gorter 2009, Blommaert 2016, Laihonon 2015). Various “scapes” emerged from cityscapes to soundscapes and from schools to smellscapes and cyberscapes (Brown 2012, Laihonon and Tódor 2017, Laihonon and Szabó 2017, Biró 2016, Androutsopoulos 2015, Pennycook 2018, Ivković and Lotherington 2009). Linguistic landscape has also been embraced as resource for language learning (Krompák 2018, Gorter et al. 2021).

This need for expansion meant the reconsideration of the term “linguistic landscape”, thus terms such as “semiotic landscape” (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010), or “semioscape” (Thurlow and Aiello 2007) have been offered as alternatives. According to Thurlow and Aiello (2007) semiotic landscape refers to “the globalizing circulation of symbols, sign-systems, and meaning-making practices” (2007: 308), where the focus has moved from the visual and material display of languages onto other semiotic resources. As Jaworski and Thurlow have pointed out, researchers became interested in the interaction between language, visual discourse, and culture and the use of space as a particular semiotic resource. In their interpretation, semiotic landscape means in the most general sense “any (public) space with visible inscription made through deliberate human intervention and meaning making” (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010: 2). This perspective has been scrutinized by Gottdiener (2012). According to his view, Jaworski and Thurlow may be best understood as advocates of a semiotic approach to linguistic landscape studies. The term *linguistic* refers to the object of study itself, namely language, while *semiotic* refers to a particular approach to the object of study. Therefore, semiotics has the potential to provide a robust approach to reading visual language in the public space and connect the interpretation of the signs to sociocultural contexts.

Chróst (2020) has pointed out that the object of linguistic landscape studies generally has four qualities. First of all, there is the linguistic quality, interpreting

the presence or absence of languages within a territory. Second, there is the social quality, addressing social meanings. Third, the visual quality has to be mentioned, and forth, the spatiality can refer to any public space. Space is only given meaning through human interaction. They are semiotic spaces, that is, “an ecological arena that goes beyond written texts of signs and includes oral languages, images, objects, placement in time and space, and also people” (Gorter 2013: 197). In the present study, I view the linguistic landscape in this broader, semiotic sense and as a nexus of meaning-making and identity construction in physical space (Scollon and Scollon 2003).

## **2.2. The football stadium as a public space**

All the above described conceptual, methodological changes towards a more general social semiotic approach have required linguistic landscape studies “to expand the scenery” (Shohamy and Gorter 2009) to any public space. Public spaces have fluid nature, where the borders are not strictly defined, and these spaces are constructed by an infinite amount of signs, which, either deliberately or in an unplanned way, contribute to meaning-making.

Pennycook (2010) outlined new ways of understanding urban space while interpreting the language and semiotics of graffiti. He argued that there are different ways of claiming space, and he lists four parameters in his model of analysis. Applying his parameters to the football stadium as a public space, first there is the need to understand how and why certain signs are created. Second, following Pennycook (2010), we need to understand how these signs are read and interpreted. Third, there is the concern to define how different linguistic resources have to be analysed. And fourth, the question of dominance of one or more signs over one or more other signs has to be clarified.

Here, the football stadium can be understood as an objectively distinct social space that is created by specific social groups. This space encompasses more than just the actual “loco” of the football matches, as all linguistic and semiotic resources are present way before playing the game: outside of the stadium or in the social media pages of the local football club.

Based on Pennycook’s model, these signs are created to construct a distinct identity of the particular football club and its fans as object of the present analysis. Not only the visual linguistic signs but all oral linguistic and semiotic resources become elements of identity construction: from banners to chants, from scarves to flags appearing in the stadium. The display of these signs can be interpreted as a symbolic act of belonging to a particular community and sharing a common identity. The different linguistic and semiotic resources can be analysed in two categories: identity construction in the space and reterritorialization of the space. And, finally, the predominance of one or more signs can be interpreted in terms

of state language – minority language dichotomy, as well as the role of English as a language choice is worth to be analysed.

### **2.3. Reterritorialization and linguistic landscapes**

In this context, the linguistic landscape of a football club becomes (i) the space of identity expression, indexing the collective identity by the use of linguistic and semiotic resources (Shohamy 2006). It also turns into (ii) the space of reterritorialization, where reterritorializing means restructuring of a place or territory that has experienced deterritorialization at a certain point in the past – in other words, (re)making it as “own” place, integrating local culture, becoming again a nexus of spaces, relations, and texts in contact (Monaghan 2020). The relatively new concept of reterritorialization has gained ground within the volume published by Malinowski et al. (2020). Their work includes a wealth of theoretical and methodological discussions focusing on the reterritorialization in the linguistic landscapes.

This conceptual framework, now employed by linguistic landscape research, is based on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, published in 2004. According to them, specific spatial processes can occur, namely the processes of (re)territorialization, which produce spatial arrangements according to categorical markers such as nationhood, class, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and so on (Cerimaj et al. 2020). By contrast, the processes of deterritorialization separate space from identity discourses. (Re)territorialization and deterritorialization, in turn, “are achieved through a variety of semiotic means which encompass specific linguistic, visual, and other semiotic choices” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983 – qtd. in Cerimaj et al. 2020: 118). As Monaghan explains, football fans use a range of resources to claim a particular football club as their space, which is defined through reterritorialization. As he further clarifies, here we can rely on a “regime of signs” (Monaghan 2020: 178), linguistic or semiotic resources of the football club such as online/offline adverts, branded kits, souvenirs, and also online resources available on their website and social media pages. These are completed by the “local practice” of the fans, which involves banners, chants, ad-hoc displays, because “what we do with language in a particular place is a result of our interpretation of that place; and the language practices we engage in reinforce that reading of place”, and this local “becomes the site of resistance, of tradition, of authenticity, of all that needs to be preserved” (Pennycook 2010: 2–4). As a new space, a newly built stadium offers endless possibilities for the club owner and for the fans to make this space their own, to do this with a clean slate, or a “tabula rasa” of the linguistic landscape.

### 3. Methodology

During the process of collecting and analysing data, I have combined different methods, producing different types of data. To explore my research questions, the core method was the photographic data collection – offline and online –, which resulted in different visual linguistic and semiotic data.

These data were categorized into two major groups. The first category includes the so-called static linguistic landscape elements such as the stadium itself, the visual and semiotic resources outside and inside of the stadium, as well as some locally assigned spots for advertisements of the football club in the city, which were documented via photo-taking. These resources are stable, typically remain unchanged, for example, the flags, chants, anthems, slogans, hashtags, etc.

The second category is based on data collected during matches, which comprises so-called dynamic elements. These include banners, ad-hoc visual linguistic signs, but also oral linguistic data, the majority of them Hungarian-only. The offline resources blend together with the online data collected from social media posts, where bilingual, Hungarian–Romanian linguistic data is more prominent, as well as the presence of English as language of neutrality is also visible. All these data collections were complemented by interviews carried out with two fans of the football club. The goal was to gather the various offline, online resources produced and used by the fans and the club owner, as official agent, and this resulted in more than 300 images, approximately 25 videos available on the official website, including the official statements of the club. Secondary data collection was based on more than 30 newspaper articles related to language use, language policy, and current fan conflicts experienced in the stadium (see *Table 1*).

**Table 1.** *Categorization of static and dynamic linguistic signs in the LL of football*

<b>Static elements</b>	<b>Dynamic elements</b>
the stadium	banners
adverts	ad-hoc signs
flags – with inscriptions	oral linguistic data
chants	newspaper articles on conflicting
anthems	discourses (< 30)
slogans	
hashtags	

Besides interpreting the visual language in the public space, the semiotic resources connect the interpretation to sociocultural contexts. As already mentioned, these signs, such as chants, scarves worn by the fans, or flags

waved in the stadium, also construct the distinct identity of the studied football club. The display of these signs symbolizes the act of belonging to a particular community. Data analysis focuses on the presentation of linguistic landscape elements which enable football fans to claim the club and the stadium as their own space and construct their identity in a minority context. Furthermore, it attempts to integrate the interpretation of conflicting discourses existing between fans of rival teams as part of the reterritorialization process.

### 3.1. The Sepsi OSK football club: Historical and sociolinguistic contexts

*Sepsi OSK* is a Romanian professional football club based in Sfântu Gheorghe [Sepsiszentgyörgy], which is the capital city of Covasna County, in the central part of Romania. In the census of 2021,<sup>1</sup> 69% of the city's inhabitants categorized themselves as ethnic Hungarians, 19% as Romanians, the rest as Roma or other ethnicities; 70% of the population indicated Hungarian and 18.5% Romanian as their first language.

It is important to mention that the largest Hungarian minority in the former territory of the Hungarian Kingdom, dissolved in 1920, lives in Transylvania, Western Romania; however, Romanian language has a dominant official status in Transylvania. Hungarians constitute the largest ethnic minority in Romania (1,002,151 – 6% of the total population).<sup>2</sup> Hungarian is not only the home language but the language of everyday public communication for Hungarian-dominant bilinguals<sup>3</sup> in Szeklerland,<sup>4</sup> a historic and ethnographic area in Transylvania, inhabited mainly by the Szeklers, a subgroup of Hungarians. Szeklers make up nearly 75% of the population of Szeklerland. The rest of the population consists of Romanians, Roma, and Germans. Although there is a positive attitude towards multilingualism as a means of integration into the European community and global society, different attitudes and ideologies apply to the state language than to the Hungarian language. In general, people's attitudes towards the Romanian language are influenced by their views of national state language policy, which is quite often connected to the hegemony of Romanians as the national majority group. State language policy is typically defined as top-down language policy (Biró 2016).

Football in Romania has a long and controversial history and a very versatile narrative. As Péter (2010) claims, conspiracy is one of the “oldest” topics in the narrative of football. Its roots go back to the communist regime. From this point

1 <https://www.recensamantromania.ro/> (Last accessed: 15 May 2023).

2 Census 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics\\_of\\_Romania](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Romania) (Last accessed: 15 May 2023).

3 Dominant bilinguals are bilinguals who are more proficient in one language as compared to the other language.

4 It is a historic and ethnographic area in Romania, inhabited mainly by Hungarians and Romanians, a region of three counties with more Hungarian inhabitants than Romanian.

of view, football expresses the anomaly of the Romanian political transition, with all the phenomena of corruption, fraud, etc. Football, in this context, represents the failure to respect the rules that matter (Péter 2010). Therefore, in these circumstances, reterritorialization or restructuring a space may also mean resetting the rules, (re)creating something sustainable, respectable, and united.

The football club was founded in 2011 by László Diószegi and Dávid Kertész in Sfântu Gheorghe, and it is part of the Romanian Football Association. Sepsi OSK tends to represent the Hungarian minority of this region although the owner of the club, László Diószegi, has repeatedly pointed out that Sepsi OSK is about sport, and despite any criticism, this team does not belong to Hungarians but to people who love football, be they Hungarian, Szekler, or Romanian fans.<sup>5</sup>



**Picture 1.** *The logo of the Sepsi OSK football club*<sup>6</sup>

It was also decided that, in respect with the tradition of football in Sfântu Gheorghe, the colours of the club should be red and white. With reference to the past, it was also agreed that the club should bear the name OSK (acronym for the old, discontinued football club: *Olt Sport Klub*). It was also important to emphasize that it was a local club in Sfântu Gheorghe. Thus, the name of the club became Sepsi OSK (*Picture 1*). *Sepsi* is the shortened word for *Sepsiszentgyörgy*, the Hungarian name of the town Sfântu Gheorghe. In six years, the club managed to climb to the top through the Romanian league system. The turning point in this process was the construction of the new football stadium of the city, the Sepsi Arena Stadium, with a seating capacity of 8,500 seats, built with Hungarian grant money, at a cost of €20–25 million.<sup>7</sup> In 12 years, not only a football team has been created but also a home with the construction of this new stadium. Furthermore,

5 [https://www.3szek.ro/load/cikk/103011/edda-koncerttel\\_unnepeltek\\_az\\_elvonalba\\_jutast](https://www.3szek.ro/load/cikk/103011/edda-koncerttel_unnepeltek_az_elvonalba_jutast) (Last accessed: 15 May 2023).

6 Photos credit: official Facebook page of Sepsi OSK.

7 <https://hang.hu/sport/gspro-mennyi-penzt-kuld-orban-viktor-sepsiszentgyorgyre-153116> (Last accessed: 15 May 2023).



Sepsi OSK won the Romanian Cup in 2022 and 2023, and the club has managed to build an enthusiastic fan base in the city.



**Picture 2.** *The home: The Sepsi OSK stadium*

The stadium, as a public space, already succeeds in strengthening the identity of the Hungarian minority. The concept of the Sepsi OSK stadium was designed by a Hungarian architect; then a local expert redesigned the façade of the facility to resemble buildings designed by emblematic Hungarian architects Imre Makovecz (1935–2011) and Károly Kós (1883–1977). For example, the turrets on the four corners of the stadium feature this style with a Hungarian cultural connotation, shown in *Picture 2*. The space itself became part of identity construction and a site of tradition, “of all that needs to be preserved” (Pennycook 2010). The construction of the stadium therefore meant restructuring a territory, as the launching point of the reterritorialization process, and, echoing Monaghan (2020), the time has come for football fans to use linguistic and semiotic resources to claim this space as their own. No wonder the stadium is nicknamed the “Fortress” by the fans and the club owner, a connotation that goes back to the local fortified churches built by the Hungarian minority – this way creating a link between modern football and historical-cultural past.

## 4. Data analysis

### 4.1. Linguistic resources and reterritorialization

A significant part of identity construction is linguistic identity (Lenihan and Kelly-Holmes 2017), which associates someone or a community with the use of specific language or languages. As far as linguistic representation is concerned, we refer back to Pennycook’s (2010) concept of “language as local practice”, where

the choice of language is always the result of the interpretation of a place, which can be divided, as mentioned before, into two main categories. The first category in this analysis covers the static linguistic elements of the linguistic landscape, online or offline. The second category refers to the dynamic elements, which are “on the move” during the actual matches, within the stadium (see *Table 2*).

**Table 2.** *Distribution of linguistic resources based on languages*

	Linguistic resources			
	HU-only	RO-only	Bilingual	English
Static elements	scarf with text, flags, anthems, chants, hashtags	coach statement (videos, online), product ads (in the stadium)	match info (online), holiday wishes (online), souvenirs	match info (offline and online), holiday wishes (online)
Dynamic elements	banners, ad-hoc signage, oral linguistic manifestations	oral linguistic manifestations	banners, ad-hoc signage	banners

The static elements of the linguistic landscape of football are influenced by the linguistic, cultural, and ethnic characteristics and the preferences of the supporters. The majority of the supporters and fans identify themselves as members of the Hungarian minority, feel a connection with this “Hungarian” club, and call the stadium their own space. Therefore, the choice of the Hungarian language, whether present on online or on-site visual linguistic signs, is predominant compared to Romanian. The fan scarf, as a static element, displays Hungarian-only text (*Picture 3*) and is held as a main symbol of team loyalty, pride, and respect, with an explicit reference to colours of the old football club: *Bennünk a vér piros-fehér* [The blood in us is red-white.], which is also the main slogan of the fans, together with the following: *Néha a lehetetlent is kísérteni kell* [Sometimes even the impossible must be tempted] or *Mindig egy csapatért* [Always for one team]. Hashtags are also displayed only in Hungarian: #csakazosk [#onlytheosk], conveying the feeling of togetherness through the use of minority language, Hungarian.

Lots of souvenirs sold in the club store are accompanied by Hungarian-only inscriptions. The club flags are not only semiotic resources, as they can display texts as well. However, typically only the name of the football club appears on them, which contains the Hungarian place-name “Sepsi”, without its Romanian equivalent “Sfântu Gheorghe”.



**Picture 3.** Hungarian-only inscription on scarf

The chants, anthems are oral linguistic resources, and they are sung and shouted only in Hungarian by the Sepsis OSK fans. Football chanting is an expression of collective identity (Knijnik 2018). They can be obligatory part of a football match or some spontaneous oral expressions, adjusted to the events happening in the stadium. The most typical chants used by the fans are: *Ria Ria Hungaria!*, a chant also used by all Hungarians during football matches, and *Hajrá Szentgyörgy!* [Go Sfântu Gheorghe!], reflecting local and national Hungarian identities at the same time.

Football chants are usually short, based on some simple words, but more often they are full songs. They are typically performed repetitively, accompanied by handclapping, drum beating, or by other typical manifestations. They can be adaptations of popular songs, but some of them are original. The Sepsis OSK chants are mostly “borrowed” from the Hungarian football club FTC [Fradí]<sup>8</sup> from Hungary, which links the Sepsis OSK even tighter to the Hungarian identity. In 2018, the Sepsis OSK anthem was composed by a Hungarian rock band, called *Edda Művek* [Edda Works]],<sup>9</sup> founded in Budapest, Hungary. The author of the song is the singer Attila Pataky. The anthem’s lyrics not only inspire victory but also connect the team and its fans to the region: *Megmutatjuk, / Megmutatjuk, / Székelyföld / A mi otthonunk*. [We will show, / We will show, / Szeklerland / Is our home]. The space of football thus becomes the space for expressing a regional homeland, which is reterritorialized, restructured, and connected to the ethnic Hungarian identity.

Another significant song, which is always sung during the OSK matches, is *Nélküled* [Without you], composed by the Hungarian band *Ismerős Arcok* in 2008. This song has been chosen as the anthem of the DAC football club in Dunajská Streda, Slovakia [HU: Dunaszerdahely]. From this Hungarian-dominant

8 <https://www.fradi.hu/en> (Last accessed: 15 May 2023).

9 <https://sepsiosk.ro/MUSIC1/> (Last accessed: 15 May 2023).

city in Slovakia, the use of this song has spread to other football stadiums in Hungarian regions, including current Hungary. There it was also the main theme of the opening ceremony of the new Puskás Arena in Budapest in 2019. The song, dubbed as the song of “togetherness”, takes on a deeper meaning – it largely deals with the fate of the scattered Hungarian people and the nation after the Trianon peace dictate that ended the First World War in 1918.

Finally, as a core element of this identity construction, the Szekler anthem is sung after matches by the supporters and fans in front of the whole team. The lyrics of this anthem, originally a poem by György Csanády, was written in 1921, the music composed by Kálmán Mihálik and adopted as the anthem of Szeklerland on 5 September 2009 but sung as the Szekler hymn for decades before. The anthem is about the patriotism of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, with a deep connection to the place representing the homeland, emphasized in its lyrics: *Ne hagyd elveszni Erdélyt, Istenünk!* [Do not let Transylvania perish, our God!].

Banners, or ad-hoc signages displayed by fans during matches are typically Hungarian-only – for example, *Kedves Roli, kérlek add nekem a pólód* [Dear Roli, please give me your shirt] (Picture 4), addressed to the Hungarian-speaking goalkeeper of the team; at the same time, some of these banners are bilingual, too.



**Picture 4.** Hungarian-only, handwritten sign of a young fan

The dynamic linguistic landscape of football can be related to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of de- and reterritorialization, where fans reterritorialize each time the stadium as their space through the use of the club's linguistic and semiotic resources and via their own ad-hoc signage. We can see evidence of this in the above mentioned static and linguistic resources used and created by the supporters and fans, as well as the official agent, the club and its ownership.

Bilingualism is present on the official website of the club, and it is also characteristic of the Facebook profile of the official fan base (Picture 5), displaying the slogan of the club in both languages: *Always for one team!* However, the Hungarian text is in top position, indexing the prestigious state of the Hungarian

language in the broader linguistic landscape of a bilingual minority region, which is necessarily contrasted to the official language policy regarding the presence of the minority languages. As revealed by the interviewees, bilingual oral linguistic manifestations are not rare during matches. The supporters carefully make their choice of language depending on the addressed opponent. Sepsi OSK team members are always addressed in Hungarian, even though only one player is of Hungarian ethnicity at the moment. However, the referees are addressed and shouted at in Romanian, especially if they make decisions that are not in favour of the home team. The choice of language symbolically constructs the “us” against the “others”, builds the “home” versus the “enemy”.



Picture 5. Bilingualism shared on the social media / official website



Pictures 6–7. Online official announcements, New Year multilingual wishes

The use of English is also displayed, as it indexes the international characteristic of football. Moreover, in a minority language situation, where the use of the state language forces the minority language into a subordinate position, English is given a neutral role, and in this case “English is not part of multilingualism”,



“not indexical of any particular country” (Kelly-Holmes 2013: 138). The use of English can be interpreted as a polite gesture towards the members of the Sepsi OSK team, as the majority of them are footballers coming from other countries, and English is the *lingua franca* of the team (Pictures 6–7).

Occasionally, English can be the choice of language on-site as well – for example, due to the Russia–Ukraine war, an English-only solidarity message was shared in the stadium (Picture 8).



**Picture 8.** *Solidarity and anti-war message*

A football stadium seems to be an excellent space to observe the construction of this linguistic and cultural identity, also the specific patterns of language choice by the supporters and fans.

#### **4.2. Semiotic resources and reterritorialization**

The semiotic resources accompany the linguistic ones, and they also emphasize the unity and togetherness among the fans. Besides the flags, scarves as the club’s main semiotic resources, we can find local products, which also tighten the bonds between the club and the local Hungarian-Szekler identity. They constitute clear expressions of support for the club while conveying a local identity. Alcoholic drinks like a local beer, the *Tiltott Csíki Sör* [Prohibited Csík Beer], which displays the logo of the team on the bottles as a marketing strategy, and the souvenir figures, *Pista bá* [Uncle Pista], sold by the club, are typical, symbolic elements of this local ethnic identity (Pictures 9–10).

Flags are obligatory semiotic resources (Monaghan 2020) during football matches. The flag of the Sepsi OSK club together with its crest represent the fans’ devotion towards the team. The Szekler flag is used as a symbol of the Szekler ethnic group, subgroup of Hungarians, living in Romania. The civil flag of Hungary (without the state coat of arms) as a national emblem is usually displayed during the matches.

However, the use of these symbols constitutes a constant problem in Romania.<sup>10</sup> The regulations referring to the use of these national symbols in the stadiums is controversial, and in 2023 the UEFA did release an official announcement, according to which supporters cannot display the flag of Greater Hungary, as well as another national symbol, the Árpád stripes, at international matches.<sup>11</sup> The display of these was considered as provocative and racist behaviour during the Seps OSK matches by the Romanian rival team supporters.



**Pictures 9–10.** *Local products, brands, and symbols*

Besides the linguistic and semiotic resources, conflicting discourses between fans have to be analysed as potential signifiers of space reterritorialization. Ethnic polarization is evident in football in Romania, and Seps OSK is often considered a “Szekler-Hungarian” team in this area unofficially referred to as Szeklerland, with a Hungarian ethnic majority. These circumstances prepare the setting for conflicting discourses in the football stadium as well. Since linguistic landscapes are constructs which usually reflect language ideologies and policies (Shohamy 2006), they can deliver significant information about the differences between the *de jure* official language policy and the *de facto* implementation of the same policy. This becomes evident as the public space of football lacks clear language policy regulations. The Act of 2008/4 on preventing and combating violence during sports competitions includes reference to the display of racist, discriminative messages; however, in actual cases, the police officers present at the matches approve or prohibit the use of banners in the stadium. Therefore, it may happen that discriminative messages addressing the ethnic Hungarian minority, such as *Pentru voi acasă nu e în România. Plecați!* [Your home is not in Romania. Go away!], may appear on banners (*Picture 11*).

10 <https://www.mikioimre.ro/en/the-szekler-flag-caused-a-diplomatic-incident/> (Last accessed: 15 May 2023).

11 <https://hungarytoday.hu/uefa-bans-flags-depicting-historical-great-hungary/> (Last accessed: 15 May 2023).



**Picture 11.** *Romanian discriminative messages on banners*

These conflicting discourses are well illustrated by the use of linguistic and semiotic resources. In the above mentioned banner, not only the text of the banner but also the use of the Romanian national colours reinforces the message.

The fan group of the Seps OSK club, the *Székely Légió* [Szekler Legion], which includes Hungarian and Romanian members, tries to reterritorialize the space with the linguistic and semiotic resources already mentioned, while the matches may end up in conflicting discourses. A Hungarian-only fanatic football supporter group, the *Transylvanian Fanatics* (Picture 12), occasionally uses other resources to take part in these discourses, which are on the extreme side and drive them away from other supporters. The two groups of fans do not mix, and this is reflected in the arrangement of the space. Not only the supporters of rival teams are seated in separate sectors, but fanatic supporters also have separate areas in the stadium.



**Picture 12.** *Transylvanian Fanatics ultra-fans dressed up in black*



The symbolic function and the dynamic characteristic of both linguistic and semiotic resources are needed to reterritorialize the public space of football in this minority context. The ethnic conflicting discourses blend with the highly emotional state of a football match, within the *fight in the arena*, which may further explain why football reflects society and its tensions with such fidelity.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The linguistic landscape of football proves to be dynamic, fluid, and challenging. The linguistic and semiotic elements are created by official and non-official sign makers to claim the space as their own. These signs can be interpreted as identity-constructing elements and analysed as potential resources in the process of reterritorialization of the public space of football. The dominance of the Hungarian linguistic and semiotic resources also points towards a strengthened ethnic identity and a permanently reterritorialized space.

With the help of static and dynamic linguistic and semiotic landscape elements, I have analysed how fans use offline and online resources successfully in the public space of the football stadium to construct their identity and engage in conflicting discourses while reterritorializing the public space of a new stadium. The presence of the fans with their banners, scarves, flags, and their voices is static and dynamic at the same time; and they persist online through the social media. Drawing on a linguistic landscape analysis with a semiotic approach, I have delivered a sketch of the linguistic landscape and the processes of restructuring the space, how the fans reterritorialize the stadium by the use of various linguistic and semiotic resources.

Similar to any football club, fans accept the similar, exclude the different to construct their club identity. In the case of Sepsi OSK, ethnic identity-forming elements, such as singing the Szekler anthem, the presence of the Szekler Legion fans, etc., is obligatory; the club identity integrates the local, collective identity. Bilingual identity construction, integration of Romanian local fans is officially embraced. Although ethnic conflicts are unavoidable, the Hungarian minority is now on the map of Romanian football.

As for further research, there is a need to extend the objectives of the linguistic landscape of football with the help of qualitative analysis carried out with more interviews among different groups of fans in order to get a proper picture of possible differences in identity construction, and to find out whether this reterritorializing process of the space dictates new power relations within the linguistic landscape of the region.

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