The linguistic landscapes of Chişinău:

Forms and functions of urban public verbal signs in a post-Soviet setting

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Abstract

As one of the fairly new fields of research in linguistics, the study of linguistic landscapes (LL) is concerned with language as a medium of communication in its written form. This includes virtually all displays of written language such as shop signs, billboards, placards and other formal and informal displays of written language visible to us in publicly accessible places. Apart from a purely discursive dimension, this approach also serves as a useful tool to study language use in multilingual urban settings where the linguistic landscape often is a highly contested and politicized space. In this paper we explore the linguistic landscape of such a multilingual agglomeration, Chisinau, the capital of the Republic of Moldova. Based on a corpus of digital pictures displays of written language this paper explores the status, various functions and quantitative distribution of the country's two main languages, Romanian and Russian. Keeping historical as well as political aspects in mind, assumptions on language preferences and functional domains of the languages displayed will be made, allowing for an insight into patterns of language use in a post-Soviet republic.

Introduction

This article analyses the linguistic landscapes of the capital of the Republic of Moldova, Chişinău. This study is part of a larger study on public verbal signs in this Eastern European capital. The analysis of a linguistic landscape or cityscape is a fairly new approach to study multilingualism in urban contexts and concentrates on the observation of urban public verbal signs visible to everyone. These include advertising billboards, shop signs, placards or any other displays of written language (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 25) and as such refer to 'any sign or announcement located outside or inside a public institution or a private business in a given geographical location' (Ben-Rafael *et al.,* 2006: 14). By analysing these specimens of written language, assumptions about the functional domains, prestige, status and spread of languages in bi- and multilingual settings can be made. The objects of our analysis are commercial shop signs, advertisement banners, placards and election posters that are part of a corpus of over 1300 digital pictures of the linguistic landscape of Chişinău taken in March 2009. As the given survey of the linguistic landscape of Chişinău is still a work in progress, we will concentrate on a limited number of signs that nevertheless constitute representative examples within their context. Contextualising these signs following the paradigms in linguistic landscape research includes the identification of the *textual genre*, *external position*, *location*, *domain*, *context* and *place* to which the sign belongs to (Barni & Bagna, 2009: 132). Other aspects play a role as well, such as the 'semiotic reading of the dominance of one linguistic code over another on bi- or multilingual signs' (Malinowsky, 2009: 108) and a distinction between symbolic and informative meaning of the languages depicted. Based on these aspects it is the aim of our analysis to identify the different functions the two main languages spoken in Chişinău – Romanian and Russian – fulfil the contexts they are used in. Furthermore, it is the aim of this analysis to examine whether English is in a process of replacing Russian, the former *lingua franca* of Soviet Moldova in certain domains. This is crucial from two perspectives: first of all it might, according to Ben-Rafael (2009: 51), show patterns of language use against the background of political dissent between Moldovans and the Russian-speaking minority that characterised the political development of the country since its independence in 1991. Second it will show if English emerges as a third language and an integral part of the cityscape of Chişinău.

Moldova – A nation on the margins of Europe

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and national independence in 1991, Moldova struggles for its existence. Unsolved territorial issues, the loss of 12% of its territory and a major part of its industrial complex after a brief but violent war of secession, a defunct concept of national identity, a failed social and cultural transformation and a high dependence on foreign resources hinder a positive development of the country (Gabany, 2004: 9).

While most countries of the former Eastern bloc did not experience any fundamental change in their conception of national identity and were able to connect to pre-war traditions, Moldova already struggled in finding consensus about what is part of a genuine Moldovan cultural and political identity. Without discussing decisive events in Moldovan

history in detail it can be stated that alternating influences from both Romania and Russia dominated, allowing no development of a concept of national identity. After the Second World War Moldova became part of the Soviet Union and formed the Moldovan Socialist Soviet Republic. Large scale work migration from Russia and other republics of the USSR was fostered and changed the ethnic composition of the country. Nevertheless Moldova found itself in a peculiar situation 'as it was the only Soviet Republic where the language spoken by most of the population was in the same time the national language of a neighbouring non-Soviet albeit socialist country' (Kraft, 2009: 3). To tackle this problem, Soviet authorities fabricated a concept of a distinct Moldovan people with an own language, culture and history. Still, most expected a swift accession to Romania after the breakup of the USSR in 1991. This has never been realized and Moldova was faced with the task of building up an own notion of national identity. During the first instable years of independence till 1995 the political elites of the country developed no clear and consistent concept of national history and of what constitutes the Moldovan nation (King, 2000: 160). Although no government distanced itself from the concept of a distinct Moldovan identity and tried to promote it to various degrees, the people of Moldova largely ignored such discourse on national identity. The concept of a Moldovan identity remains 'a mystery and a miracle in history' (van Meurs, 1998: 39). Thus it is of no great surprise that on the question 'What is the meaning of citizenship in Moldova today?', 'Having a blue passport' was the most frequent answer given by inhabitants [...] of Moldova'[1] (Heintz, 2008: 2).

Language and politics

The conflicting self-image of Moldova and its troubles in finding national self-consciousness can be exemplified by the relationship between language and politics in the country. Already before the declaration of independence language had political implications in Moldova. In 1990 the Supreme Soviet of the republic passed new language laws that changed the national language Moldovan[2] from Cyrillic to Latin script along the conventions of contemporary Romanian. The status of Russian was devalued as well, as it lost its distinguished status as a language on equal footing with Romanian and became a 'language of interethnic communication' (Dumbrava, 2003: 54). At the moment of independence, about half of the ethnic Moldovan population had a sufficient command of Russian, while most of the Russian speaking population were not able to speak Romanian. Till then Russian dominated in all public domains and was essential to know in higher education and work life. In independent Moldova the sharp decline of the status of Russian continued and Romanian became the working language of all public institutions and the country's administration. This ethnic revival triggered fears of a rising Romanian cultural dominance within the Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking community, especially in the highly industrialized eastern regions of Moldova. Romanian was declared the national language in the Moldovan declaration of independence in 1991 and public opinion among ethnic Moldovans turned towards reunification with Romania. Following an armed conflict that resulted in the secession of Russophile Transnistria, the Moldovan administration introduced progressive minority

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[1] Moldovan passports are light blue in colour
[2] Following the conventions in Romance linguistics, Moldovan is considered a dialect of Romanian and as such will be referred to as Romanian in this paper

language laws that recognized the right to choose one's ethnic group freely and granted individuals the right to use their mother tongue in public domains such as the judiciary.

Within Moldovan society controversies emerged when Moldovan and not Romanian was codified in the country's constitution as the national language in 1993, marking the end of a pro-Romanian policy and a turning point towards the recognition of the distinct Moldovan language as part of the concept of a distinct national identity. Nevertheless, political elites and the general public disagreed about the denomination of the country's official language. This cleavage is best exemplified by the three lines of conflict and their different approaches towards Moldovan Romanian itself: the Bucharest-, Chişinău- and Tiraspol-line, named after the respective capitals of Romania, Moldova and Transnistria.

The Bucharest line views the idea of a distinct Romanian language as a propagandistic invention of Moldovan national elites. As Moldovans are in fact ethnic Romanians, their language ought to be classified as Romanian. Moreover, as differences between the two languages are minimal on a grammatical, lexical and phonetic level and as such at most justify the status of Moldovan as a dialect of the Romanian language.

The Chişinău-line has been tied to the idea of Moldovanism. In regard to Soviet efforts to construct and define a Moldovan nation, the differences between the Moldovan and Romanian people where emphasised. Nonetheless, especially the administration under President Vladimir Voronin from 2001 until 2009 maintained this very notion of Moldovanism and tried to promote it in all domains of society (Tomescu-Hatto, 2008: 196). Interestingly, the idea of Moldovanism does not necessarily imply a rejection of the country's second language, Russian. On the contrary, the political protagonists of Moldovanism around former President Voronin even tried to implement Russian as a compulsory language at schools, an attempt that triggered mass protests in Chişinău in 2002 and that was abandoned later on. Constructing a national identity is still an issue amongst Moldovan cultural and political elites, but in October 2009 the new pro-Western government under Prime Minister Vlad Filat announced that the constitution of the republic will be changed and Romanian reintroduced as the country's official language (Tudor, 2009).

The Tiraspol-line of argumentation follows traditional patterns of Soviet-Moldovan language policy and accentuates the distinctiveness of Moldovan Romanian, highlighted by the use of the Cyrillic script. Although it is one of the three official languages of Transnistria, apart from Russian and Ukrainian, Moldovan Romanian is marginalized, as the dominant language in all domains is Russian.

At this point it is not necessary to decide which of these three lines has to be adhered to, although within linguistics the Romanian point of view is favoured and even the Moldovan Academy of Sciences supports this position. Of greater importance are everyday patterns of bilingual language use in both Romanian and Russian and observations regarding the different functional domains both languages fulfil in the country. While it is of no surprise that Russian lost a significant share of its prestige and status after Moldovan independence, current research indicates that Russian is gaining ground again. Exemplarily, studies conducted in villages close to the Romanian border by Belina & Arambasa (2007: 194) showed that approximately 52% of those questioned claim to use Russian as an everyday language. Also the underfunded Moldovan media accounts for a revival of the Russian language. Often it is not possible to acquire American or European TV productions or dub them into Romanian and cheaper Russian programs are broadcast instead. These are viewed by over 60% of the population on a daily basis (Belina & Arambasa, 2007: 194).This is a considerable number considering that, according to the 2004 census, urban centres such as Chişinău have a 30% share of Russian speakers. Does this indicate a revival of Russian in

Moldova, possibly accompanied by changing patterns of national self-image and identity? Up to now this question remains unanswered, as certain structural factors have been widely ignored by researchers. On the one hand, many elderly Moldovans have difficulties in using the Latin script and are equally insecure in using standard Romanian[3] as in using standard Russian especially in rural parts of Moldova (Belina & Arambasa, 2007: 194). On the other hand, Russian is widely preferred over Romanian by other national minorities such as the Gagauz or the Bulgarian population and used as a tool for interethnic communication (Sarov, 2007: 106).

Another point to consider is the phenomenon of large-scale work migration of Moldovans and the influence this might have on the language situation in the country. At present almost a quarter of the population – approximately 800 000 Moldovans – are living and working abroad mainly in Italy, Spain, Romania, Russia, the Arabian Gulf region and the US. Their influence on the language situation upon their return to Moldova will show in the future but to a certain extent it can be assumed that the level of English proficiency and the general importance of English will grow, especially as a language used on public displays of written language. Nevertheless it remains to be seen if the claim that English is entrenched firmly 'as the globally dominant language' (Mair, 2006: 10) can be applied to Moldova as well or if Russian can uphold its status as a *lingua franca* in the country.

Meaning in context – Different languages, different functions

Signs in public areas accessible to everyone can mirror a particular language background and especially in bi- and multilingual cities serve as a useful tool to find out more about the functions these different languages fulfil within specific contexts. Are just those languages displayed one might expect by considering the demographic structure of the city or are other languages represented as well? And if so, do these languages, according to Cenoz & Gorter (2009), carry symbolic meaning and can we – to a certain extent – even assign certain connotations to them? Furthermore, is there a relation between the location of the signs and the languages displayed on them, a phenomenon discussed, among others, by Landry & Bourhis (1997), Cenoz & Gorter (2009) and Ben-Rafael et al. (2006)?

The meaning of languages displayed might go beyond the mere informative and opens up another dimension, namely a symbolic one. In this respect it is not only important to analyse the distribution of different languages on one sign, but also the space each language occupies on it, allowing assumptions on the dominance of one code over another on multilingual displays of written language. In addition to that, the actual content has to be considered as well. Often, languages on bi- or multilingual signs do not necessarily tell the same: one language might have rather symbolic value whereas others directly address passers-by with information assumingly valuable and informative to them. Also, location plays a crucial role when focusing on multilingual signage in urban centres, combining many aspects such as the imminent location of the sign within a certain street, shopping centre or neighbourhood, but also its location in a more wider sense, meaning if it is located in a commercial or residential area of the city, close to main transport hubs such as railway

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[3] People who see Moldovan as a dialect of Romanian often have a very negative attitude towards their mother tongue up to a form of 'linguistic self hate' (Dumbrava 2004: 62)

stations, airports or main thoroughfares or on the margins of urban districts, in deprived or affluent residential areas. Various studies of linguistic landscapes in urban centres (cf. Backhaus, 2007; Ben-Rafael *et al.*, 2006; Huebner, 2006) have shown the crucial role the location of a sign plays in the overall distribution of languages on it.

In that respect, Chişinău is a multilingual urban centre where the study of public signage will certainly yield interesting results. On the one hand, the linguistic landscape of the city can be analysed along what McCormick and Agnihotri (2009: 12) call 'non-linguistic forces', determining the 'currency value' certain languages have, including those that one might not expect within a particular environment. A look at the demographic structure of the city is useful in that respect (Ben-Rafael, 2009: 52), as it clearly shows that roughly two third of the city's inhabitants claim to speak either Romanian or Moldovan as their mother tongue, whereas one third of the population states that Russian is their first language. But also the particular location of a sign is worth exploring in Chişinău, as the city features a main shopping street, two Western style shopping malls, a train station area of considerable size as well as various peripheral residential areas known since Soviet times as microdistricts (Rus. *Микрорайоны*).

Advertising as linguistic landscape

The observations presented in this article are part of a larger study on the linguistic landscape of Chişinău that focuses on the relationship between demographic data and the frequency of different languages visible on displays of written language in four districts of the city, namely *Centru*, *Rîşcani*, *Botanica* and *Ciocana*. The examples discussed in this article are part of a corpus of approximately 1300 pictures compiled in spring 2009 that contains pictures of displays of written language taken from various predefined streets. On these streets most signs visible were taken into account and considered as units of analysis. Although not exhaustive, these nevertheless show clear and easily distinguishable patterns of language use in respect to context and function. On the one hand, both Romanian and Russian are used fairly frequently, although differentiations have to be made in regard to certain aspects. Within the city centre around *bd. Ştefan cel Mare* Romanian seems to be the preferred language especially on shop signs. Often Romanian is used in conjunction with English and to a lesser extent Russian, but this pattern clearly changes the further away from the city centre the sign is located. Especially in residential areas Russian fulfils the same informative functions as Romanian and in that context cannot just be seen as a second language. This is underlined by patterns of language use on informal advertisements such as placards or small posters which often showed Russian alone, leading to the assumption that Russian is a local *lingua franca* still widely understood in the city, presumably also by those who speak Romanian, Ukrainian or any other language as their mother tongue. By and large, signs put up by private enterprises or individuals shown here are the obvious choices for an analysis of a linguistic landscape in a predefined area, as they reflect best which functions particular languages have and how they are used to communicate information in various contexts.[4] A quantitative summary of all signs observed in four districts of the city

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[4] Such a bottom-up approach to study linguistic landscapes is usually the most feasible way to analyse the various functions different languages have on urban verbal signs, as these most likely reflect 'real life' patterns of language use. Nevertheless this does not hold true for a small number of countries such as Estonia or Latvia where – apart from official signage (top-down) – also language use on bottom-up signs is regulated. In Moldova

underlines the impression that Russian is firmly entrenched in the linguistic landscape of the city. This is exemplified in Table 1 below. Furthermore it shows, that English is used fairly frequently as well, but as our examples will show, carried rather symbolic functions.

	Chişinău
Romanian	23.7
Russian	17.8
Romanian/Russian	22.1
Romanian/English	15.5
Russian/English	3.4
Romanian/Russian/English	6.0
English	4.8
Other*	6.7

* This category includes other multilingual signs
   with languages not frequently observed

Table 1 Distribution of languages on signs in Chişinău showed as percentage

The area most inhabitants and visitors of Chişinău alike will encounter fairly often is the city's main shopping street, *Bulevardul Ştefan cel Mare*. It is the commercial centre of the city, located within the *Centru* district. The street itself as well as the areas in close proximity can be considered the most prestigious places to live and work in Chişinău. Along *bd. Ştefan cel Mare* most government buildings including the presidential palace and the parliament are located; furthermore, embassies, headquarters of Moldovan and foreign companies and prestigious Western style chain stores and fast-food outlets can be found in its vicinity. In this area Romanian is by far the most frequently used language on signs and is present virtually everywhere, seen in front of shops, restaurants, offices or as part of advertisement banners or placards. But an analysis of signs on *bd. Ştefan cel Mare* and its side streets also reveals that most of the time, Romanian is used alongside at least one other language – either Russian or English, in some instances even both.

Typical examples of bilingual signs in both Romanian and English were fairly frequent and displayed by upmarket shops or travel agencies. One example found was a travel agency at the corner of *str. Puşhkin* and *bd. Ştefan cel Mare* in the very heart of the city (picture 1).

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on the other hand, bottom-up signs put up by private enterprises are not regulated, although at least the name of the establishment has to be written in Latin script.

Picture 1   Travel agency at the corner of *str. Puşhkin* and *bd. Ştefan cel Mare*

At first sight it seems clear which language is the dominant one as both the company's name *Royal Garden* as well as the names of the different countries signalling possible tourist destinations are displayed in English. Although *Sirya* is spelled incorrectly and *Tunis* seems to be rather ambiguous, possibly relating to the city rather than the country, together with the pictures on the right, English conveys the notions of exclusivity and internationality. Apart from this rather symbolic meaning of English, Romanian is used to actually inform the audience about what the agency has to offer, namely that it is a travel agency (*turism*)[5] offering airplane tickets (*bilete de avion*). These phrases are also found above the entrance of the agency, in conjunction with a telephone number and an e-mail address. Interestingly, although most clients of this agency are certainly Moldovans, for an e-mail address the English term *office* (*office@royalgarden.md*) is used to carry notions of exclusivity, affiliation to the Western world as well as a sense of modernity.

Another sign-in-sign found at the front door is the ubiquitous phrase *exchange* which is found all over the city displayed not just by banks but virtually every shop or travel agency of considerable size. Here English is dominant if compared to the Romanian term underneath, stating the Romanian equivalent in meaning, *schimb valutar*. At first one might assume that this sign is aimed at tourists. But as the number of foreign visitors from Western countries is relatively low, even in the country's capital and keeping in mind that many Moldovans rely on money send to them by relatives working in countries of the European Union or in the United States, the choice of the English term probably relates to the overall distribution of English and Romanian on this particular shop front. Although the English term *exchange* is fairly often seen especially around *bd. Ştefan cel Mare*, most signs signalling exchange offices either used the Russian term *обмен валют* on top and the Romanian *schimb valutar* beneath it or vice versa. Especially along the Eastern end of *bd. Ştefan cel Mare* adjacent to the main train station Russian was by far the dominant language in this context.

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[5] A term in Romanian denominating a travel agency and thus similar in meaning to the English one

Another commercial sign from downtown Chişinău depicting both Romanian and English was found on *str. Vlaicu Pîrcălab* opposite the *Skytower Business Centre***,** again in the vicinity of *bd. Ştefan cel Mare*, displayed by a beauty parlour (picture 2). Already the name of the establishment – *Estetic Art* – is a code-switch between the Romanian term *estetic,* meaning 'aesthetical' and the English *art*. Although it is not uncommon that English terms with rather symbolic value are not necessarily understood by Moldovans, *Art* is certainly an exception, as it is lexically close to the Romanian *artă* and thus mutually intelligible for the audience. Such an example of language combination raises questions about the 'salience of language boundaries or identities' (McCormick & Agnihotri, 2009: 15). Certainly sign producers are often aware of their target readers and know, if and to what extent such alternations are at least accessible if not even attractive to the reader. McCormick & Agnihotri (2009: 15) identify two main strategies for language combination: alternation of phrases from different languages as well as incorporation of 'elements from two languages into one phrasal structure'. Of the two possibilities the latter strategy is used here, although it seems that this practice is not commonly used on commercial signs in Chişinău. As already stated, the term *Art* will be easily understood by a Moldovan audience, whereas other terms seen throughout the inner city such as `Celebrate in Style´[6] are probably not part of the linguistic repertoire of most inhabitants of the city.

The various forms of treatment displayed below the shop's name are mostly depicting Romanian, except two terms that probably do not have an equivalent in that language, namely *NAIL-ART* and *STOUN-MASSAGE*. Nevertheless, both have rather symbolic functions and convey notions of trendiness as well as a Western orientation.

Picture 2   Beauty parlour on *str. **Vlaicu Pîrcălab*** near *bd. Ştefan cel Mare*

The misspelling of *STOUN-MASSAGE* – originally intended to mean *stone massage* – is certainly not an example of intentional language alteration as observed in various studies on linguistic landscapes in urban centres such as Bangkok (Huebner, 2006), Tokyo (Backhaus,

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[6] *Celebrate in Style* was a slogan found on billboards in the *Centru* district put up by the fashion shop 'Steilmann'

2007) or Cape Town and Delhi (McCormick & Agnihotri, 2009), but rather accounts for a lack of language proficiency. But such instances of unintentional creativity in language use will most likely go unnoticed by clients and passers-by, as the actual information about the function of the establishment is unambiguous for a Romanian-speaking audience.

Moving on in close vicinity of *bd. Ştefan cel Mare*, one notices a significant number of clothing stores catering to the relatively small number of middle- and upper-middle class Moldovans. Unlike some of the travel agencies, beauty parlours and upmarket fashion stores, these mostly local run businesses show quite different patterns of language use on their commercial signs, exemplified by one store located on *str. Vasile Alecsandri* seen on picture 3. Advertisement seen in front of the shop uses both English and Russian, but not Romanian. In this case, English is by far the dominant language, denoting both the store's name – *dresscode* – and giving an additional inscription on the top left corner reading *discount center*. Arguably, these are catch-phrases signalling an orientation towards Western style clothing and a somewhat sublime sense of modernity, underlined by pictures of young women and men dressed according to the latest fashion.

Picture 3   Clothing store on *str. Vasile Alecsandri* in the city centre

This notion of 'percept' Western orientation is further underlined by a barcode in the upper-left corner that is somewhat related to the store's name. While certainly some clients and passers-by will be able to 'decode' the precise meaning of *discount center*, not many will comprehend the meaning of *dresscode*. Nevertheless they probably understand the Russian phrase *МАГАЗИН СТИЛЬНОЙ ОДЕЖДЫ* positioned above the shop's name, signalling a shop with "stylish" clothes. Whereas English is employed to trigger positive associations, Russian is used to inform the audience about what is on sale. As with most signs that featured English to some extent in the city centre of Chişinău, it is also the dominant code on this one and again it is used to carry notions of an orientation towards the West, of cosmopolitanism and internationality. Romanian on the other hand is only visible on the very bottom of the sign to signal the address where the store can be found. Understandably it is not written in Cyrillic script as this would exclude some of the occasional visitors from neighbouring Romania and other European countries. Apart from small placards and other

informal notes put up by individuals on lampposts or walls, addresses were given in Romanian and written in Latin script. In that particular case one might argue that the English name of the shop is a way to meet the states' language laws that require shopkeepers to have the name of the store written in Latin alphabet and not in Cyrillic. By using English instead of Romanian, this criterion is met.

Moving away from the area around *bd. Ştefan cel Mare* towards the district of *Rîşcani* to the north, one encounters an abundance of agencies arranging work permits and work and study visas for Western countries, primarily the United States, Canada and, to a lesser extent, countries of the European Union. These are located around *str. Cosmonauţilor*, *str. Mitropolit Bănulescu Bodoni* and *str. Pedru Rareş* in close proximity to the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova ASEM. Signs put up by these agencies as in picture 4 are a mirror of the grim political and economic situation of the country and at the same time are testament to the exodus of urban, Romanian-speaking youths and well educated professionals towards the West. The banner put up in front of the 'USA Immigration' visa agency uses Romanian, Russian as well as English to address potential clients, but each language features a distinct function. One might argue which the actual dominant language on the sign is, but the English phrase *Register Now!*, printed in red with an exclamation mark at the end certainly draws on the attention of the addressee and can be interpreted both as an invitation or even as a direct order. The company's name 'USA Immigration' on top of the banner, written in blue and red – colours easily associated with the United States – underlines this assumption.

Picture 4Banner in front of an agency arranging green cards on *str. Cosmonauţilor*

One could argue that the term 'immigration' is mutually intelligible to locals as it translates into Romanian as *imigrare*. But it is very likely that 'immigration' as an English word is understood by most addressees. Given the facts that migration is a phenomenon that affects most Moldovans either directly or indirectly and that the continuously high number of work migrants are of great concern to the society as a whole, one could assume that the concepts

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behind terms such as 'immigration' and 'green card' are comprehensible to most. In this context English carries a highly symbolic function, but at the same time we can assume that most of the people addressed by the sign associate the agency's name, the font it is written in and the stylised American flag with a notion of the American dream. This is underlined by the person dominating the left part of the sign, an 'average man' pointing his right index finger on a green card, which – metaphorically – represents the way to success in life and suggests that everyone has the potential to achieve the goal to live and work in the United States. To underline the general notion of Western orientation and modernity the web address of the agency in the lower right corner reads *www.greencard.md*. The actual details on how to get a green card are written in Romanian, which is fairly obvious, as most of the clients are Romanian-speaking. Nevertheless, at the very bottom of the banner, *Register Now!* is also written in Russian. Although the orientation of young Russian speakers in Moldova is mostly towards Russia, the command *Регистрируйтесь Сейчас!* nevertheless signals the Russian-speaking Moldovans that they are also potentially eligible for the services the agency has to offer. The command being written in three languages also opens up an interesting semiotic dimension, if we take the man's picture on the left and the red arrow of which the command *Register Now!* is stylistically part of into account. Moldovans and Russians will understand the underlying message, namely that registering with this company means getting a green card and eventually, having success in life. Although this might be a rather trivial message for some, obtaining a permission to permanently work and live in the United States is very prestigious in Moldova, considering the overall level of income and the general living conditions in the country. The geographical location of the banner has to be considered as well: many of such agencies can be found around *str. Cosmonauţilor*, as it is in close proximity to ASEM, thus having access to a considerable number of potential clients, namely young, well educated Moldovans most willing to migrate and seek employment elsewhere.

Further north on the way to the various microdistricts of *Rîşcani* and *Ciocana* along the main thoroughfare *bd. Renasterii* the observer encounters a considerable amount of bilingual billboards mainly written in both Romanian and Russian. Although the area around the northern end of *bd. Renasterii* can be considered rather affluent by Moldovan standards, its cityscape differs from the prosperous inner city and does not feature any upmarket shops or restaurants. One billboard representative for this neighbourhood was located near the circus of the city above a pedestrian underpass (picture 5). It is a commercial ad put up by a company offering sanitary accessories and it uses Romanian as the dominant code. In this language potential customers are informed of what the company offers and of the special offers with discounts up to fifty percent. The address is given in Romanian as well. What is remarkable though is the fact that the banner includes a huge red overprint in Russian, reading *ПОСЛЕДНЯЯ НЕДЕЛЯ СКИДОК*, which translates as "last week when discounts are given."

Picture 5   Billboard on *bd. Renasterii* put up by a company offering sanitary accessories

Here, both languages share an informative function, but each language gives different information, assuming that the readership is actually bilingual in Romanian and Russian. Still, Russian serves as a kind of *lingua franca* here, as those who put up the banner were most likely conscious that most who speak Romanian as their first language have – due to obvious historic reasons – at least a sufficient command of Russian to comprehend this particular phrase. Furthermore it reveals that Russian as a minority language can be used to address not only those who speak it as their first language but for speakers of Romanian as well. This is not necessarily a usual pattern in post-Soviet countries, as observations on the linguistic landscape of the Lithuanian capital Vilnius have shown (cf. Muth, 2008). There, Russian seems to evoke rather negative connotations amongst speakers of Lithuanian because of shared feelings of oppression and dominance of Russian in Soviet times.

Apart from commercial shop signs, billboards and advertising banners, a lot of rather informal placards put up by individuals or small-scale businesses can be found all over the city. Exemplarily, picture 6 will be discussed here. A placard found attached to a lamppost in the residential district of *Botanica* in the southeast of the city on the areas' main through road *bd. Dacia*. Quite unusual for the Western European spectator it offers to buy women's hair, paid according to the hair's length and colour. In terms of language choice it is exemplary in two ways: on the one hand it is typical, because most informal placards solely used Russian to convey information, on the other it is found in a residential area characterized by huge apartment blocks. Nevertheless, demographic figures indicate that the number of mother-tongue speakers of Russian and Ukrainian is not higher than in other districts of the city[7], although Russian was used far more often on signs in peripheral areas than in the city centre. Both the exact date – the 18th – and the term *ВОЛОСЫ* (hair) were printed in bold text, presumably intended to catch the eye of passers-by. As on most other informal signs, the address is written in Russian and states the name of the neighbourhood,

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[7] Demographic data provided by the Moldovan National Office for Statistics indicates that the number of mother tongue speakers of Russian and Ukrainian is almost equal in all four districts (data obtained from *Biroul Naţional de Statistică al Republicii Moldova* in Chişinău)

Старая Почта as well as the street, *ул. Соколова 9*. In other contexts this would be an unusual practice, as it does not resemble the official name of both the neighbourhood (*Vama Veche*, literally "Old Post") and the name of the street, *str. Socoleni*. But instead of the transliteration *ул. Соколень*, the name used in Soviet Moldova – *ул. Соколова* – appears. Such a pattern is also characteristic of informal conversations among native speakers of Russian and Ukrainian in Chişinău, where streets and neighbourhoods are often referred to by their Russian names.

Picture 6 Placard offering to buy hair on *bd. Dacia*, *Botanica* district

As such names are part of a cultural or distinctly urban cultural identity as '*Кишинёвцы*'[8], one could argue that a certain degree of cultural resentment against the Romanian language might reveal itself here, extending to informal displays of written language.

A district perceived by inhabitants as having rather low prestige is *Ciocana* in the north-eastern part of the city. It is characterized by industrial estates, low-rise apartment blocks and single houses in its southern part and several microdistricts located further north. As in *Botanica* the number of informal signs such as graffiti, placards and small posters was high and most of them were either bilingual in both Romanian and Russian or written in Russian alone. Signs put up by supermarkets, fashion stores or gaming arcades usually depicted both Romanian and Russian; in addition to that, also English was occasionally used. As in pictures 2 and 3 English had symbolic functions and was often used as an 'eye catcher', communicating internationality and in particular a notion of Western culture. Picture 7 is a billboard located on the main thoroughfare of one of *Ciocana's* microdistricts, *bd. Mircea cel Bătr*.

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[8] Mas. *chişinăui'eni*/ fem. *chişinăui'ene* in Romanian, denoting a person from Chişinău

Picture 7 Billboard put up by an employment agency on *bd. Mircea cel Bătrîn*, *Ciocana* district

It is a trilingual sign depicting Russian, Romanian as well as English. Russian is the dominant language here embodied by the call *Работа в Дубае!*, meaning 'Work in Dubai!', highlighted by an exclamation mark. The term *Работа* (work) is accentuated by its orange print and its dominant position on the sign. Although it is Russian, we can assume that *Работа* is also understood by speakers of Romanian in Moldova. This term alone communicates a range of connotations comparable to those of 'USA immigration' on picture 4, but this time within a broader context. On the one hand it naturally has a certain appeal in what is at present Europe's poorest nation with low wages and substantial underemployment and as such points towards a general understanding of a future perspective for those willing to emigrate. On the other hand it addresses a far wider audience than the sign put up by the visa agency depicted on picture 4. It is of possible appeal to those with an academic education as well as to unskilled labourers or factory workers. In its vagueness the term *Работа* serves as an expression of success, future perspectives, money and – taking the skyscrapers behind into account – of internationality. The catchphrase also appears in Romanian on top of the sign, but unlike the Russian phrase it is not accentuated by a specific colour. English is used as part of the internet address depicted in the centre of the ad. As it seems to be widespread practice throughout the city, URL's most likely contain at least some English words. Here the term 'job' is used and we can assume that the younger part of the audience is able to relate the address *www.MoldovaJobS.md* to the advert itself. In addition to that, more detailed information about

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the program is given on the very bottom of the sign in Russian, English and Romanian. The reasons to include English here are not perspicuous, as there are no potential addressees who speak English as a first or second language in Moldova. Presumably the phrase *3 Years Employment, Residence, Airline Ticket, No Fees Required* is used to accentuate the agency's international reputation and credibility. Although one could argue that these words have an informative function as well, the context in which the sign is found in suggests that they are rather to be seen as emblematic. Firstly, the sign is located in a peripheral residential area; secondly these job offers are not aimed at the few Western expatriates currently living in Chişinău. On the lower right part of the sign some telephone numbers related to specific countries in the Middle East and Central Asia are given. Interestingly, unlike the catchphrase suggests – it is not only Dubai where this agency offers work, but also in less affluent countries such as Egypt and Kyrgyzstan. This certainly highlights the difficult economic situation Moldova finds itself in. Furthermore, highlighting Dubai with an exclamation mark also shows which places seem to have a special appeal and a good reputation among Russians and Moldovans alike. Sadly though, numerous NGO's in the country warn that most of these agencies offering work abroad do engage in human trafficking and often, young Moldovan women are forced to work as prostitutes once they arrive in their country of destination (Heintz, 2008: 8ff).

Election posters as part of the linguistic landscape

Moving away from the aspect of location the study of public verbal signs in Chişinău gets another, more political dimension when including signs that can be attributed to specific politic actors such as election posters. Regardless of the location of the sign these reveal language attitudes that would go unnoticed when just concentrating on bottom-up displays of written language. All specimens considered here were part of the campaign for the fifth parliamentary election in independent Moldova on April 5th, 2009 and include all contestant parties of political significance. Because of allegations of electoral fraud committed by state institutions close to the former governing *Partidul Comuniştilor din Republica Moldova* (Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova), civil unrest along a dividing line between pro-Western urban Romanians and a rural population in support of the Communist Party broke out in Chişinău and other urban centres of the country that lasted for days. Whereas most Moldovans living outside the capital region as well as most Russian speakers overwhelmingly supported the Communist Party, many voters from Chişinău favoured the main opposition force *Partidul Liberal Democrat din Moldova* (Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova) or one of the country's other pro-European parties. Exemplarily, election posters of the two main contestants, the Communist Party PCRM (picture 8) and the Liberal Democratic Party PLDM (picture 9) are discussed here.

Picture 8 Election poster of Moldova's Communist Party PCRM

Considering the political disposition of the PCRM, a bilingual sign displaying both Romanian and Russian is nothing unusual. Both languages are given equal space and font, with Romanian depicted on top and Russian at the bottom of the sign. As part of communists symbolism stylised hammer and sickle are depicted in the centre of the sign, highlighting both the party's self-conception as being 'Communist' as well as drawing on those who have a rather positive attitude about the Soviet era in Moldova. The message depicted on the poster in Romanian and Russian stands in contrast to that and resembles the conflicting agenda of the party. The use of Soviet symbolism possibly evokes positive feelings of Soviet Moldova, whereas the rather indecisive slogan that reads *We build a European Moldova together* seems to be aimed at a European-friendly audience, reflecting the two-faced and at times unclear orientation of the PCRM, which so far has been characterized by the search for political allies both in the European Union and the CIS. The use of both languages indicates where the PCRM draws its voters from: on the one hand Moldovans from the rural parts of the country, on the other urban speakers of Russian and the elderly.

Picture 9 Election poster of Moldova's Liberal Democratic Party PLDM

The PCRM's main antagonist on the country's political scene is the populist pro-Western Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova that is at present part of the governing Alliance for European Integration where it plays the leading role and thus provides the country's Prime Minister Vlad Filat. The party views itself as liberal conservative, pro-European and pro-Western and is in support of a policy of European integration and closer ties with neighbouring Romania. Interestingly, the party uses both Romanian and Russian on its election posters, but unlike the PCRM it uses monolingual posters in either Romanian or Russian. This is a pattern not expected as the Liberal Democrats are strongly opposing political and cultural ties with Russia and mainly focus on ethnic Moldovan Romanians. The catchphrase of the poster is in fact not identical in both Romanian and Russian. Whereas the Romanian slogan translates as *Green for Chişinău Green for Moldova*, the Russian version reads *The capital in green colour Moldova in green colour*. Judging by their contents, both slogans share the same meaning, but in the Russian version *Chişinău* is replaced by the Russian term *столица* (capital city). This has two reasons, as during Soviet times the city was commonly referred to as *Кишинёв*, a name preferred by Russian-speaking Moldovans and native speakers of Russian in general. In using this term the PLDM would certainly thwart its own political agenda of rejecting cultural or political influence of Russia in Moldova. Using the official denomination of Chişinău in Cyrillic – *Кишинэу* – on the other hand would certainly be of no appeal to native speakers of Russian, as this name is just used in official contexts and not part of the language repertoire of the Russian-speaking population.

Other political parties roughly follow the same patterns of language use as both Communists and Liberal Democrats, but it shows that language choice is closely related to the political agenda and the potential audience the election poster is aimed at. Centre-right parties such as the *Partidul Alianţă Moldova Noastră* (Party Alliance Our Moldova) used monolingual posters in either Romanian or Russian, while nationalist parties like *Partidul Popular Creştin Democrat* (Christian-Democratic People's Party) solely used Romanian on all signs. Centre-left and left parties such as the *Partidul Democrat din Moldova* (Democratic Party of Moldova) on the other hand displayed bilingual signs both in Romanian and Russian.

Conclusion

The representation of different languages in multilingual urban environments is a phenomenon that has emerged in linguistic landscape research in recent years (cf. Ben-Rafael *et al.*, 2006; Ben-Rafael, 2009; Cenoz & Gorter, 2006). By analysing specimen of written language assumptions about the functional domains, prestige, status and spread of languages in bi- and multilingual settings can be made. For the study of multilingualism in urban settings the distribution of minority languages on signs and other specimen of written language are obvious indicators on the language situation within an urban area. In the same time they are also part of a wider picture that relates to aspects of political and cultural representation and status of the respective national languages within bi- and multilingual societies. The observation of signs in various parts of the Moldovan capital led to interesting results. Considering our examples, in respect of its linguistic landscape, Chişinău is a genuinely bilingual metropolis where Romanian is the primary language of communication and Russian functions as a local *lingua franca*, apparently used in a wide range of functional domains. It is used on informal displays of written language such as on placards (picture 6), but also gives additional information on otherwise monolingual Romanian signs (picture 5), leading to the assumption that the authors of these displays of written language presuppose a sufficient knowledge of Russian by those the sign is addressing. English on the other hand has largely symbolic value, but nevertheless carries distinctive connotations. First and foremost it conveys notions of internationality, success and Western orientation (pictures 1 and 4) and is mainly used to appeal to mobile and young Romanians, often those most likely willing to emigrate from the country. An assumption that English is taking over functional domains that characterise the status of Russian as a local *lingua franca* cannot be upheld, as the use of English never goes beyond a purely symbolic dimension. Still, as Russian is used to carry informative meaning that is expected to be understood by most of the population, the status of English seems to be equally entrenched in the linguistic landscape of the city, although it is the symbolic value of English that most of the population seems to be aware of.

The project of Moldovanism and the construction of a Moldovan national and cultural identity pursued by some of the political elites of the country does not manifest itself in the linguistic landscape. The election posters discussed in 3.1. are emblematic for the obvious failure of the promotion of Moldovan/Romanian as a tool for constructing a national identity. Regardless of the political affiliation of a party the country's second language Russian is used alongside Romanian by almost all political actors, an exception being one far-right pro-Romanian party. This certainly accounts for a failure of the project of promoting Moldovan Romanian as a prime marker of national self-consciousness, but on the other hand is testament to an unbiased approach to bilingualism and is rather surprising given the fact that language policy has been a hotly contested topic ever since Moldova's independence. It remains to be seen if Russian will be able to uphold its exposed position in the linguistic landscape of the Moldovan capital. Given the highly symbolic connotations English has up to now, it will not replace Russian as a second language in the foreseeable future, but taking the spread of English as a world language into account and considering the high number of Moldovans living and working abroad, it will continue to hold its place as an integral part of the city's linguistic landscape. A diachronic perspective will show if its functions on public signs will go beyond a symbolic dimension in the future.

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