Nahla Tawfik

German-Arabic language combinations in the linguistic landscape of Leipzig's Eisenbahnstraße[1]

The term linguistic landscape (LL) denotes two things: representations of written language in public space and the research that investigates this phenomenon (cf. Ehrhardt/Marten 2018, p. 3). Many studies in LL research explore multilingualism in the public sphere in close association with patterns of migration and globalization. Methodologically, this research field draws principally on authentic data in written form that are often complemented by comprehensive photographic documentation, participant observation and interviews with passers-by and those who produced the written signs.

The subject of this article is the visual presence of Arabic in the LL of Eisenbahnstraße, a street in Leipzig that has been shaped by migration. Due to migration flows and the increasing number of inhabitants of Arab descent, Arabic is not only becoming increasingly noticeable in the urban soundscape of Germany but also in the LL. The aim of the article is to analyse the LL of Eisenbahnstraße with regard to the presence of Arabic and varying combinations of German and Arabic. The main focus is on the following research questions: How does the sociolinguistic background influence the development of the LL in Eisenbahnstraße? How is Arabic combined with the majority language German? What types of discourse, manifestations and functions of multilingualism can be identified?

To answer these research questions, photos were taken in August 2023 to document all instances of written text along Eisenbahnstraße that included a visual representation of Arabic. The current study only covers the stretch between the two tram stops Einertstraße and Torgauer Platz. A total of 90 written texts including Arabic were documented and analysed. The main categories of analysis were discourse types, functions, forms of language combination and language contact phenomena. A qualitative-illustrative analysis of the digital photo documentation was combined with interviews with 16 producers of signs on their reasons for choosing the language(s) they did so that it was not only possible to describe their linguistic behaviour but also to be able to explain it if possible.

The analysis of the digital photo documentation bears witness to the extensive use of Arabic in the LL of Leipzig's Eisenbahnstraße and, thus, to the robust vitality of Arabic in constructing the public sphere and shaping the appearance of Eisenbahnstraße. The practices identified in the German-Arabic language combinations reveal the creativity and intercultural competence of those who produced the signs in relation to bidirectional target customer orientation and the decision to make use of inclusive or exclusive linguistic behaviour depending on the intended target group. A closer look at the types of discourse involving Arabic in the LL revealed that it is not used in infrastructural types while it appears to varying degrees in commercial, private-regulatory and transgressive types of discourse. The dominant type is commercial discourse with the aim of benefitting from the economic value of Arabic. As far as the private-regulatory type of discourse is concerned, examples were documented that attest Arabic's function of regulating private behaviour or prohibiting undesirable behaviour. Evidence of transgressive types of discourse was par-

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ticularly revealing as it serves to address messages and appeals to the public, to declare individual positions in the public sphere, to fight established power structures in the migrant community and to show the presence of the Arab community through tags. The analysis revealed that in terms of semiotic design, the choice of colours and the use of oriental images or motifs as ethnocultural markers also plays an important role in the development of the LL. Added to this, the use of Arabic personal names and place names can be understood as an attempt to construct an inclusive identity and to convey a sense of one's native land in the LL. It is also worth noting practices of hierarchizing the languages by font size and by positioning them in the middle or on the edge, which sheds light on the power relations of the languages involved and on the high status of Arabic as the language of Islam.

In conclusion, both functional-pragmatic and social-symbolic motives can be identified in the choice of language used in the public sphere and the visible presence of Arabic, which could also be confirmed when analysing the questionnaires. On the one hand, the written signs in public places serve both to derive commercial benefits from the economic value of Arabic and to regulate private behaviour and on the other hand, they are used for the purpose of self-presentation and the construction of an inclusive identity as well as the commemoration and visualization of diverse positions in the public sphere. Informative, persuasive, identity-forming and commemorative functions are to be found side by side and cannot easily be kept apart.

This analysis of the LL in Leipzig's Eisenbahnstraße thus reveals how the sociolinguistic background can strongly influence the development of the LL in relation to the use of Arabic. As the analysis revealed, this influence proves to be reciprocal in line with Gorter/Cenoz (2024): on the one hand, the sociolinguistic context influences the development of the LL of Eisenbahnstraße through various forms of German-Arabic language combinations (symmetric-duplicating, complementary and overlapping linguistic behaviour) and various language contact phenomena (transfer practices, hybrid compounds, code-mixing and script-switching, etc.). On the other hand, the LL can have an influence on the sociolinguistic context in that an attempt is made to normalize a specific kind of linguistic behaviour through the visual presence of Arabic as well as to inspire self-confidence when using Arabic and to contribute to the preservation and acknowledgment of Arabic.

References

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