

The linguistic landscape of Stadiou Street in Athens: An ethnographic approach to the linguistic appropriation of contested space

Abstract

Stadiou Street bespeaks a story of urban de-gentrification and appropriation by ‘the others’ of Greek society, as suggested by the spray-canned messages on its prized national monuments and up-market shops. The linguistic landscape (LL) has become an arena for the discursive public negotiation of gendered and sexed predicates and meanings, as well as for the discursive production of social categories. It surfaces as a radically globalized ‘canvassing’ arena, which is being transformed through mass media, social media, and contact among local advocacy groups. Therefore, although writing can arguably be considered static, the LL of Stadiou can hardly be conceptualized – let alone studied – as static. To this effect, I approach Stadiou Street ethnographically arguing for the advantages of this approach to the LL as semiotic space.

1. Introduction

This paper, which continues my ethnographic research of the linguistic landscape (LL) of the Balkans (cf. Canakis & Kersten-Pejanić 2016), focuses on Stadiou Street, a main route connecting Omonoia and Syntagma Squares, which since 2010 bespeaks a story of de-gentrification (Canakis 2012; 2014). While forbiddingly expensive shops and top hotels are still there, Stadiou maintains its old leafy character for about one block (from Syntagma Sq. to the Old Parliament), beyond which it has been radically de-gentrified and appropriated by ‘the others’ of Greek society (cf. Γιαννακόπουλος & Γιαννιτσιώτης 2010; Seals 2013) – with the now ubiquitous spray-canned messages having played a major role in consolidating the new spatial state of affairs (http://anakaluptontas-thn-athina.blogspot.gr/p/blog-page_2961.html).

Spray-canned directives ([1]–[2], [6]) and expressive assertions ([3]–[5]), along with a variety of oral and written discourses around the city, testify to a heightened awareness of exclusion, and constitute vociferous attempts at symbolically appropriating emblematic strongholds of the local status quo (conveniently located either on or in the immediate vicinity of Stadiou):

[1] ΝΑ ΖΗΣΟΥΜΕ ΣΕ ΚΟΣΜΟ ΑΝΑΡΧΙΚΟ

[2] Η ΑΘΗΝΑ ΛΕΣΒΙΑ Ο ΕΡΜΗΣ ΑΝΑΔΡΟΜΟΣ ΚΑΙ Η ΕΡΜΟΥ ΠΕΖΟΔΡΟΜΟΣ

- [3] ΟΥΤΕ ΟΜΟΦΟΒΙΑ ΟΥΤΕ ΑΛΛΕΣ ΑΗΔΙΕΣ ΣΦΑΓΕΙΑ ΔΕΝ Θ' ΑΦΗΣΟΥΜΕ ΝΑ ΓΙΝΟΥΝ ΟΙ ΠΛΑΤΕΙΕΣ
- [4] ΑΠΟ ΤΟΝ ΠΕΙΡΑΙΑ ΩΣ ΤΟ ΠΑΓΚΡΑΤΙ ΜΕ ΣΒΑΣΤΙΚΑ Ή ΧΩΡΙΣ Η ΟΜΟΦΟΒΙΑ Ο ΡΑΤΣΙΣΜΟΣ ΚΑΙ Η ΤΡΑΝΣΦΟΒΙΑ ΚΑΛΑ ΚΡΑΤΟΥΝ
- [5] ΤΟ ΚΕΛΠΝΟ ΒΡΩΜΑΕΙ ΑΚΟΜΑ ΡΑΤΣΙΣΜΟ
- [6] ΣΕ ΚΑΘΕ ΣΕΞΙΣΤΗ ΚΑΙ ΟΜΟΦΟΒΟΒΙΚΟ ΑΞΙΖΕΙ ΜΙΑ ΒΟΥΤΙΑ ΑΠ' ΤΟ ΛΥΚΑΒΗΤΟ [sic]

Moreover, as elsewhere in Athens, counter-discourses often explicitly target ‘patriots,’ ‘the nation,’ and ‘national unity’ ([7]–[8]), as the discourse of the status quo has been marked by a sharp right-wing turn since the 2010 debt crisis (cf. Sotiris 2015; Knight 2015; Kitis & Milani 2015):

- [7] ΜΙΣΟΣ ΕΚΦΥΛΟ ΜΑΤΣΟ ΠΑΤΡΙΩΤΕΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΕΘΝΙΚΗ ΕΝΟΤΗΤΑ ΠΑΝΤΟΤΕ ΠΡΟΔΟΤΡΕΣ
- [8] ΠΟΥΣΤΑΡΕΣ ΛΕΣΒΙΕΣ ΙΕΡΕΙΕΣ ΤΟΥ ΑΙΣΧΟΥΣ ΕΙΜΑΣΤΕ ΠΕΡΗΦΑΝΑ Η ΝΤΡΟΠΗ ΤΟΥ ΕΘΝΟΥΣ

Against the background of closed shops (Picture 1), abandoned and often dilapidated buildings (Picture 2), and run of the mill protest marches on many Thursdays over the last few years (Picture 3), the LL of Stadiou gives a snapshot of urban, specifically Athenian LL (cf. Canakis 2012) but with a twist: it is the only Athenian thoroughfare that has undergone as dramatic a change and the only one in which protest signs run its entire length (roughly 1.000 meters).

2. A rough taxonomy of Stadiou's protest signs

These protest signs can be in free-hand or stenciled graffiti, posters, stickers, etc. and they can be roughly categorized as follows:

- I. Economy (recession, debt crisis, work rights, Pictures 4a–c);
- II. State authoritarianism (human rights, Pictures 5a–c);
- III. Gender and sexuality issues, especially homo- and transphobia: (a) General (Picture 6a); (b) Focusing on the nation (Pictures 6b–c)

Moreover, all of the above (especially signs on the economy and authoritarianism) overlap considerably may be either *bona fide* or facetious, a point completely missed in Knight's (2015: 236) recent treatment of slogans in Trikala. For instance, I & II and II & III are hardly distinguishable, while the latter obviously also relates to I, for protesters are explicitly rallying against circumscribed human rights as a palpable outcome of the crisis.

3. Theory, data, and analysis

3.1 Theorizing LLs: From quantification to spatially positioned linguistic ethnography

Although research on linguistic landscapes has long had an interest in issues of bilingualism and multilingualism in public spaces, with a special focus on linguistic diversity and vitality (e.g., Landry & Bourhis 1997; the contributions in Shohamy & Gorter 2009; Grbavac 2013), there is growing interest in more experimental approaches dealing with the symbolic meaning of written messages in relation to discourses on the social order, local hierarchies, and hegemonies (cf. Shohamy & Waksman 2009; contributions in Shohamy, Ben-Rafael & Barni 2010).

More recently there has been a decisive turn to the study of LLs as dynamic *semiotic landscapes* (e.g. Jaworski & Thurlow 2010) and to *ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis* (ELLA) (Blommaert & Maly 2014), informed by Blommaert's (2013; 2016) concept of *superdiversity*, whereas other scholars (e.g., Stroud & Jegels 2014) have investigated *semiotic* landscapes through narratives of the embodied experience of human agents therein (cf. *narrated walking*) and the role of the performativity of the body in the process of resignification of urban space (Kitis & Milani 2015).

All this is in stark contrast to the first wave of (typically quantitative) LL studies focusing on bilingualism (and has generated considerable tension; cf. Blommaert 2016). This is where *motion* and *transfer* come into the picture. For the study of LLs does not have to be about static script on non-moving entities (architectural elements), but can also be script on *moving agents*, indeed *human* and *non-human* alike (e.g. T-shirt logos, flyers, and ads/inscriptions on means of transport). A good example of the strengths of ELLA is Blommaert & Maly's (2014, 9–10) focus on a van with Polish lettering in a neighborhood of Ghent, in Belgium. Through intensive fieldwork they realized that the van was not owned by a local Pole (as initially assumed) but, rather, travelled all the way from Poland on business in Ghent at regular intervals. *Motion* here refers to both the moving vehicle and to the trajectory traversed. Along the same lines, stencil graffiti, e.g., currently widely used in Greece, can be fruitfully discussed as an aspect of mobility, at least *metaphorically*, as it contrasts with the uniqueness and locational specificity of free hand graffiti.

In this work, while I am aware of using snapshots of language at a moment in time, I am (independently) also painfully aware of the vagaries of the appearance and disappearance of LL items (specific signs) through the agency of LL actors (Pictures 7–11). The *volatility* and *intertextuality* of the LL in the cityscape is precisely why I have argued (Kavάxης 2012; Canakis 2012; 2014; Canakis & Kersten-Pejanić 2016) that one of the benefits of ethnographic LL research is that it offers a privileged glimpse into social reality at a given point in time.

The innovative aspects of this work is that (a) it sets out to investigate aspects of the LL in an urban space which is not generally thought of as multilingual, and b) it does so with a focus on citizenship, and on its intricate and dynamic interplay

with dominant discourses on sexuality, ethnicity, and nationhood (cf. Weeks 1998; Lambevski 1999; Richardson 2000; Johnson 2012). It is decidedly ethnographic and envisages a dialogue between the latest developments in sociolinguistic LL research and social scientific work on space, sexuality, and citizenship (cf. Γιαννιτσιώτης 2015). Therefore, it assumes an explicitly interdisciplinary perspective, which allows for an intersectional approach.

3.2 Ethnography *qua* methodology: Current LL research and ELLA

It is precisely the *dynamic character* of the LL that is mostly addressed in second wave LL studies. This focus correlates with a qualitative turn, in stark contrast to *quantitative* first wave studies on language vitality around the world. Blommaert & Maly (2014, 9), in arguing for ELLA (Ethnographic LL Analysis), are certainly not the first ones to embark on ethnographically based data collection and analysis (cf., e.g., Shohamy & Waksman 2009; Canakis 2012); yet, they are indeed the first to provide a sustained argument for the erroneous assumptions static, quantitative LL research may be responsible for due to its methodological preferences – a stance which has already caused tension (Barni & Bagna 2015) culminating in a polemic (Blommaert 2016). Time will tell whether the two strands of LL research can complement each other or, in characteristic fashion for linguistics, deal with different aspects of a single phenomenon while trying to define the field by reducing the phenomenon to the very aspects preferred by each group.

3.3 Analyzing the data

A significant subset of Stadiou's LL items relate to the gendered and sexed self (Pictures 12–14) and have made this street the hub of 'LGBTQI' contestation over the past few years; notably so, since Gazi gradually deteriorated as gay space (cf. Canakis 2012), after a period of bustling activity (since the early 1990s) which fashioned the area into the uncontested Athenian boys' town (cf. Yannakopoulos 2010), and the subsequent move of the – progressively mainstreamed and commercial – 'LGBTQI' scene around Aghias Eirinis Sq. on Aioulou St. Still, the near absence of such signs in, e.g. Exarcheia, as late as 2007 is not insignificant – neither is the relatively low percentage in Gazi/Kerameikos after 2010. I.e., Stadiou, in the wake of the debt crisis, has emerged as a contested space; indeed, as a space emblematically contested by many suitors and the locus of a vociferous reaction to the status quo – with gendered and sexual protest signs emerging as a major contestant for space.

Once aspects of such discourses find their way onto city walls, they eventually come to stand in an indexical relation to the very places in which they were created (given different *orders of indexicality* – crucially linked to ethno-metapragmatics – as argued for by Silverstein 2003). In Athens, to appropriate Stadiou is to appropriate urban power given existing indexical relations, while, at the same time, forging new ones online (Canakis forthcoming).

Looking at gendered and sexed citizenship through the linguistic – indeed the multimodal *semiotic* – landscape (Jaworski & Thurlow 2010; Stroud & Jegels 2014) has to do with public literacy practices and, more specifically, with counter-literacies (Pennycook 2009; 2010). Graffiti, as politically significant scribbled speech in public space, often goes against the grain of local conceptions of national propriety and respectability, especially when addressing gendered and sexual normalcy (cf. Mosse 1982; Pryke 1998) or masculinity (cf. Nagel 1998), which is indexically connected to active, agentive sexuality in the Greek imaginary (Canakis 2015; cf. Milani 2014; 2015a; 2015b).

The data constitute purposefully done written utterances addressing members of the author(s)'s in-group as well as members of out-groups and are informed by specific ideologies and national narratives (Canakis 2013; 2014; Johnston 2015), as well as recently coined counter-narratives (Canakis & Kersten-Pejanić 2016; Kasanga 2014), of which these signs are but one instantiation. Such a synthesis elucidates how gendered and sexually relevant language in the LL of Stadiou is crucial in claiming politically symbolic space, while arguing for qualitative LL research (cf. Blommaert & Maly 2014; Blommaert & De Fina 2015; Blommaert 2016). This approach, which looks at 'different languages' as one aspect of the LL, is helpful in the case of Stadiou, where we find English and other languages playing a functional role in protest signs (Pictures 15–18), in contrast to the purely symbolic role reserved for most non-Greek LL items in Athens (Canakis 2014).

These expressive speech acts, in both stenciled and free-style graffiti, assume a distinctly combative tone as they touch on a variety of issues. Note, for example, the emotionally charged assertion in Picture 21; a taunt explicitly appropriating conservative local notions of homosexuality – notions which involve conceptualizations of the nation and make reference to pride. In Picture 22, we have a token of counter hate-speech alluding to the intolerance of 'gender-perverts' for the local rhetoric of 'national unity' connoting erasure of the differences so dear to and celebrated by activists of all ilk in late modernity. This verbal somersault is, expectedly, met with an equally strong and derogatorily phrased reaction. To conclude, Picture 23 makes an intertextual claim to privacy, indirectly responding to charges of secrecy against 'LGBTQI' people in Greece. Maintaining that one can be both proud *and* discreet is a rebuke of othering from within 'LGBTQI' activism; i.e. from within the realm of homonormativity, which presupposes the visibility afforded by a 'LGBTQI' scene (Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013; Canakis 2015).

The rapid rise of *Χρυσή Αυγή* ('Golden Dawn') from an object of ridicule to a political party which obtained 9,4% of the vote, combined with a wide-spread distrust of both immigrants and the West *qua* oppressive lenders, led to a deterioration of the status of 'LGBTQI' citizens as early as 2011. As elsewhere, the 'LGBTQI' population along with immigrants served as a handy metonymy for otherness and was charged with a variety of evils, among which 'dehellenizing' Greece. On the other hand, there has been a long history of 'LGBTQI' activism, with the first ever gay Pride

Parade being organized in the city in 1985 and two magazines (*Αμφί* and *Κράξιμο*) circulating since 1978. Modelled on its Anglo-American forebears, this movement arguably reached its peak during the 1990s, making for a different self- and other-representation of Greek 'LGBTQI'-identified people, both locally and internationally.

This point becomes relevant when looking at the linguistic landscape of, e.g., Belgrade, where graffitied counter-discourses function mostly *intertextually*, primarily as responses competing with preexisting homophobic graffitied slogans issuing threats in the cityscape. Instead, in Athens, these counter-discourses respond to a reinvigorated homophobic national narrative, the rhetoric informing aspects of public life and contributing to the precarious position of 'LGBTQI' persons. Moreover, in Athens, counter-discourses often explicitly target 'patriots', 'the nation', and 'national unity', presumably corresponding with nationalism and fascism, whereas in Belgrade, for instance, resistance assumes a subtle and ironic tone (cf. Johnson 2012; Sombatpoonsiri 2015). These differences index different trajectories of 'LGBTQI' awareness, activism, and visibility in the two cities, a point strongly corroborated by the demeaning reference to *homonormativity* (Picture 19) in Athens, scribbled outside a gay-bar strip in Gazi.

The graffitied data are indicative of the re-radicalization of the local 'LGBTQI' community, which insists on arguing for 'LGBTQI' matters in Greece as being on a par with other human rights. Frequent references to immigrant rights cheek by jowl with pro-LGBTQI graffiti is characteristic of the ideological political economy of Stadiou.

4. Conclusions

The LL of Stadiou Street has become an arena for the discursive public negotiation of gendered and sexed predicates and meanings, as well as for the discursive construction of social categories. The LL surfaces as a radically globalized 'canvassing' arena, which is being transformed – through mass media, social media, and, crucially, an unprecedented degree of contact among local advocacy groups. It can hardly be conceptualized – let alone studied – as static.

A crisis of institutions in Greece has been marked by soaring youth unemployment, the rise of extremist nationalist groups, and intolerance towards minority groups, including the 'LGBTQI' population. Greek nationalism found intelligible scapegoats in 'LGBTQI' people, as members of this group have had an international outlook and have often appealed to 'Europe' and the 'West' for enhanced visibility and rights. It is crucially a discourse in motion; a discourse which has circulated in a number of polities so as to be to be easily transferrable elsewhere.

Granted, the catalyst for this development has been a sense of being attacked or unfairly treated, but this does not in itself guarantee this specific reaction (as it did not on other occasions in the past). Thus, if calling on 'European values' seems to make a good case for 'LGBTQI' activism elsewhere, in Croatia for instance, at least

when addressed to Croatian political elites (cf. Canakis 2013, 13), the very same strategy serves as a counter-argument in today's Serbia (cf. Canakis 2013, 11), and to a certain extent, in Greece. Nationalist 'anti-Western' discourses came following a period of perceived prosperity within the European Union and the Eurozone, during which the Greek 'LGBTQI' population arguably enjoyed enhanced visibility and consciously used the position of Greece in the EU as leverage against the conservative political arena. As a result of this specific political trajectory, homophobia in Athens has not found its way onto city walls in the form of graffitied rebukes of threats, as it has in, e.g., Belgrade (Canakis & Kersten-Pejanić 2016). At the same time, 'LGBTQI' counter-discourses in Athens explicitly target patriotism, the nation, and national unity as dangerous values, which is hardly the case in Belgrade.

'LGBTQI' activism in Greece addresses the nation explicitly as an oppressive mechanism. Frequent (direct and indirect) disparaging reference to *homonormativity* as a form of conformism is illuminating in this respect. What is clear from the writings on the wall in contemporary Athens is that intersectionality, is a central feature in the material analyzed here, with nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, national sovereignty, and international standing emerging as important markers of the in-group. Members of this in-group, however, are also clearly challenged by hegemonic discrimination processes from the 'West'; for the idea of the infantile entrenched world targeted by Radomir Konstantinović's (2008 [1969]) *filozofija palanke* ('parochial mentality') and Diamandouros's (1993) *underdog mentality* is not, of course, an exclusively Balkan trait (as it has been known to thrive in metropolises around the globe).

Enhanced mobility and transfer of ideas in late modernity are as important aspects of the urban LL as are the well-known linguistically superdiverse LLs (cf. Blommaert 2013; Blommaert & Maly 2014). It is this mobility and transfer that lies at the heart of an anthro- and sociolinguistic fieldwork-oriented approach to the LL beyond language policy and consequently gives rise to a new research agenda. The fact that Stadiou Street – which was until very recently one of the leafiest streets in Athens – has progressively become a graffiti paradise is itself significant. Today, Stadiou features some of the most radical 'LGBTQI' and 'anti-authoritarian' graffiti in town, against the background of (few remaining yet powerfully present) expensive hotels and commercial institutions. Although there are many similarities with the LL of other major cities (be it Thessaloniki, Belgrade, Berlin or Moscow) there are also stark differences; especially the rebukes against the nation and homonormativity: for such rebukes spell out a battle (fought and) lost – and lost while everything seemed to be pointing to a win, at that.

Such rebukes spell out the desire of their authors for the position of the self-proclaimed constitutive outside of the nation (before the nation shows them their place). Yet, these very rebukes also spell out the justified disenchantment of a generation of citizens with the rank and file of an activist elite which has (almost) managed to convince them that they have found their own (non-heterosexual, 'non-heteronor-

mative’) way towards respectable Greekness, whereas, in point of fact, respectable Greekness – indeed, X-ness – always has the last word: and it is a damning and supercilious, albeit risible, hollier-than-thou addressed to the constitutive outsiders of the nation.

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Keywords: linguistic landscape, ethnographic linguistic landscape research (ELLA), gender, sexuality, ethnicity, othering

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APPENDIX: pictures



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4a



Picture 4b



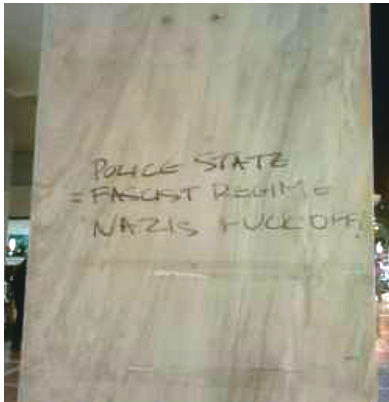
Picture 4c



Picture 5a



Picture 5b



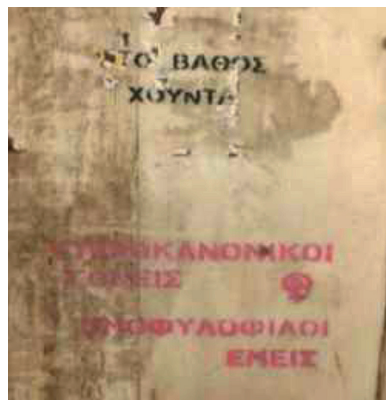
Picture 5c



Picture 6a



Picture 6b



Picture 6c

THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF STADIOU STREET IN ATHENS



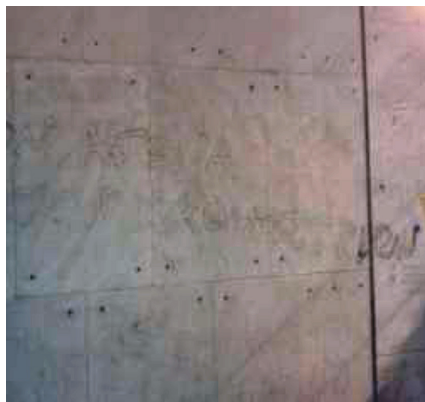
Picture 7



Picture 8



Picture 9



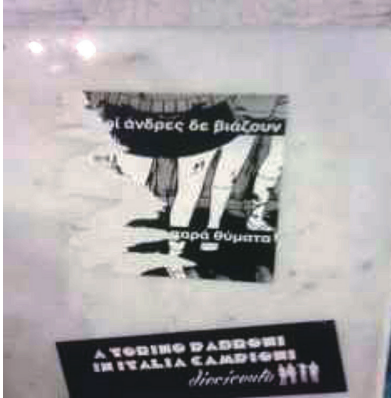
Picture 10



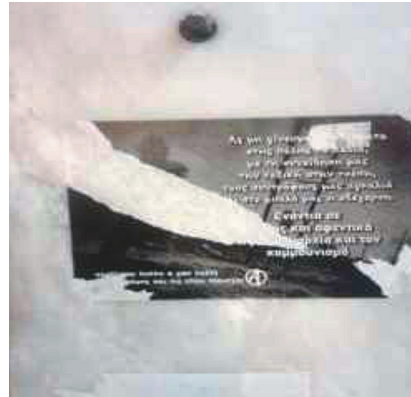
Picture 11



Picture 12



Picture 13



Picture 14



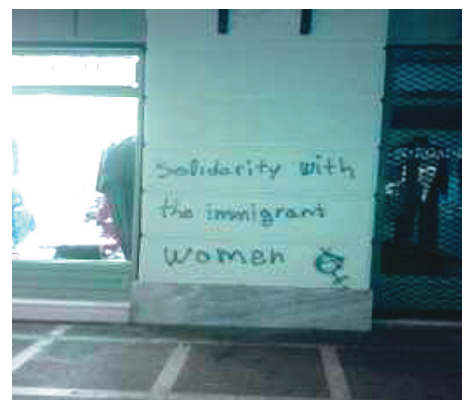
Picture 15



Picture 16



Picture 17



Picture 18

THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF STADIΟΥ STREET IN ATHENS



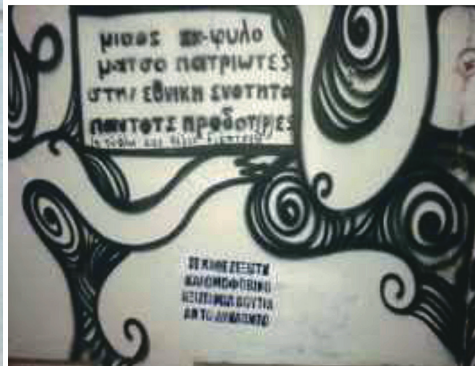
Picture 19



Picture 20



Picture 21



Picture 22

