THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE TURKISH LANGUAGE IN BULGARIA: VISUALIZATION, SEMIOTIZATION, AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Martin Henzelmann
University of Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany
martin.henzelmann@uni-greifswald.de

Sadık Hacı
Ankara University, Ankara, Turkey
shaci@ankara.edu.tr

In this article, we examine the role of the Turkish language in the semiotization of public space in Bulgaria. We begin by outlining the historical background that underpins the presence and significance of Turkish in the country, focusing primarily on the political framework that has shaped its use before and after Bulgarian independence. The Turkish population in Bulgaria constitutes the largest minority group in the country, and, therefore, the Turkish language continues to be the most important minority language. Next, we analyze the language management policies affecting Turkish in Bulgaria, considering the legal and social conditions under which it continues to develop in this southeastern European country. Through attempts at assimilation, the communist regime exerted pressure on Turkish and other Muslim communities living in Bulgaria, after changing its attitude since the democratic revolution. The historical and legal context is essential for understanding the semiotic representation of the Turkish language in the Bulgarian public sphere today. In our study, we then explore how this social background aligns with language management across different spheres in Bulgaria. We turn to the question of how the management of public space functions for the Turkish language. It is important to highlight that Turkish holds no official administrative status in Bulgaria and can therefore only appear in public spaces within certain domains. We argue that the visibility of the Turkish language in the public sphere in Bulgaria consists of two fundamental components: visualization and semiotization. Visualization is studied within the framework of linguistic landscapes, while semiotization is analyzed through semiotic landscapes. We briefly introduce these two theoretical approaches before exploring concrete examples of Turkish language use in Bulgaria. We analyze examples from relevant places with a dense Turkish minority, such as Shumen, Plovdiv, Razgrad, and others. Drawing on our empirical observations, we broaden the scope to explore both the significance and the challenges of Turkish language visibility in Bulgaria. As a result, our study shows that the Turkish language serves a niche infrastructure in the visualization of Bulgarian public space due to its absence from the administrative sphere, but the language appears where there is a sufficiently large ethnic Turkish community.

Keywords: Bulgaria, Turkish language, languages, visualization, minority languages, languages laws, language management, public space, linguistic landscapes, semiotics

ИНФРАСТРУКТУРА ТУРЕЦКОГО ЯЗЫКА В БОЛГАРИИ: ВИЗУАЛИЗАЦИЯ, СЕМИОТИЗАЦИЯ И СОВРЕМЕННЫЕ ВЫЗОВЫ

Мартин Хенцельманн
Университет Грайфсвальда, Грайфсвальд, Германия
martin.henzelmann@uni-greifswald.de

Садык Хаджи
Университет Анкары, Анкара, Турция
shaci@ankara.edu.tr

Рассматривается роль турецкого языка в семиотизации общественного пространства в Болгарии. Описывается исторический фон, лежащий в основе присутствия и значения турецкого языка в стране, основное внимание уделяется политическим рамкам языка, которые определяли его использование до и после обретения Болгарией независимости. Турецкое население Болгарии представляет собой крупнейшее меньшинство в стране, и поэтому турецкий язык остаётся самым важным языком этнических меньшинств. В статье анализируется языковая политика, затрагивающая турецкий язык в Болгарии, и рассматриваются правовые и социальные условия, в которых он продолжает развиваться в этой юго-восточной стране Европы. Пытаясь ассимилировать турок, коммунистический режим оказывал давление на турецкую и другие мусульманские общины, проживавшие в Болгарии, но после демократической революции отношение государства к мусульманам изменилось. Исторический и правовой контекст важны для понимания семиотической репрезентации турецкого языка в современном общественном пространстве Болгарии. В исследовании анализируется, как такой социальный фон соотносится с языковым менеджментом в различных сферах в Болгарии. Обращается внимание на то, как турецкий язык функционирует в общественном пространстве. Турецкий язык не имеет официального административного статуса в Болгарии и поэтому может использоваться только в определённых местах. Авторы утверждают, что видимость турецкого языка в публичной сфере Болгарии состоит из двух основных компонентов: визуализации и семиотизации. Визуализация изучается в рамках теории лингвистических ландшафтов, тогда как семиотизация анализируется через семиотические ландшафты. В статье кратко представлены эти два теоретических подхода, а затем рассматриваются конкретные примеры

использования турецкого языка в Болгарии. Анализируются примеры из мест с компактным проживанием турецкого населения, таких как Шумен, Пловдив, Разград и др. Опираясь на эмпирические наблюдения, авторы расширяют рамки исследования, чтобы изучить как значение, так и проблемы видимости турецкого языка в Болгарии. В результате показано, что турецкий язык занимает нишевую инфраструктуру в визуализации болгарского языкового пространства из-за отсутствия его в административной сфере, но он появляется там, где присутствует достаточно большая этническая турецкая община.

Ключевые слова: Болгария, турецкий язык, языки, визуализация, миноритарные языки, законы о языках, управление языками, общественное пространство, языковые ландшафты, семиотика

DOI 10.23951/2312-7899-2025-2-105-132

The status of the Turkish language in Bulgaria during the Ottoman period

The Turkish community living in Bulgaria, which still speaks Turkish today, began settling in the region with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into the Balkans in the 14th century and has left a significant cultural and linguistic legacy over the centuries. Today, the Turkish population in Bulgaria constitutes the largest minority group in the country, and Turkish continues to be the primary means of communication within this community. However, shifting political conditions throughout history have significantly influenced the status and usage of Turkish in Bulgaria.

From the 14th century until 1878, Bulgaria remained under Ottoman rule for nearly 500 years. It was one of the first regions in the Balkans to experience Turkish dominance and remained under Ottoman control for the longest period [Turan, İbrahimgil 2004, 156]. During these years, Ottoman Turkish was used as the language of administration, trade, and education, becoming widespread in Bulgaria within the multicultural structure of the empire. Meanwhile, Bulgarians within the Ottoman Empire were classified as *reaya*, meaning non-Muslims. Unlike the Turks, who were Muslims, they were subject to higher taxes. However, in terms of language use, the Ottoman Empire did not impose any forced assimilation or pressure on these communities. If a strong assimilation policy had been enforced after nearly 500 years of Ottoman rule, no other language but Turkish and no other religion but Islam would have remained in Bulgarian territories [Bilgiç 2013, 339]. Consequently,

from the 14th to the 19th century, Bulgaria experienced a period of linguistic plurality. During this time, there was considerable linguistic and cultural interaction between Turkish and Bulgarian. With the incorporation of these lands into the Ottoman Empire, Turkish traditions and customs spread throughout Bulgaria. Additionally, numerous structures such as mosques, madrasas, baths, mausoleums, fountains, bridges, and aqueducts were built. During the Ottoman rule, 3,339 Turkish architectural works were constructed in Bulgaria [Ayverdi 2006], yet only about 150 of them have survived to the present day [Turan, İbrahimgil 2004, 156–157].

The status of the Turkish language in the post-Independence period (1878–1945)

Regarding educational and religious institutions, a total of 142 madrasas and 273 schools were established in Bulgaria during the Ottoman period [Ipshirli 2003, 328]. These institutions played a crucial role in the spread of Ottoman Turkish. Ottoman Turkish was spoken in Bulgaria by Ottoman Turks, Tatars, Circassians, Pomaks, Yörüks and Turkmens, Gagauz people, Muslim Gypsies, and some Bulgarians. In 1877, the Ottoman-Russian War began and lasted for approximately a year. As a result of this war, the Ottoman Empire lost its dominance in Bulgaria, and with the Treaty of San Stefano signed in July 1878, Bulgaria was restructured as a principality [Güneş 2016, 76]. With the decline of Ottoman control in the Balkans, the Turks living there became a minority, and the future of the Turkish language took a different trajectory. Due to the war, a significant number of Turks were forced to migrate.

In 1900, the literacy rate among Orthodox Christians was 27%, while among Muslims, it was only 3.9% [Turan 1998, 306]. According to Ömer Turan, before the war, there were 2,690 schools in Eastern Rumelia, but after the war, around 1,500 of these schools were destroyed. The remaining well-functioning schools were taken from the Muslims [Turan 1998, 306]. The schools that remained under Muslim control continued operating as private institutions, which significantly restricted the rights of Turks in Bulgaria to receive education in their native language.

In 1908, following the declaration of the Second Constitutional Period in the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Bulgaria declared its independence [Güneş 2016, 83]. With the Istanbul Protocol signed in April 1909, the Ottoman government recognized the Bulgarian Kingdom, making Bulgaria fully independent. Shortly afterward, the Balkan Wars broke out, bring-

ing the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria into direct conflict and marking the beginning of difficult times for the Turks living in Bulgaria. Many schools were closed, mosques were destroyed, and Bulgaria's assimilation policies gained momentum. Under such political circumstances, Turkish became confined mostly to family settings and was transmitted to future generations primarily through oral tradition.

Following the adoption of Islam by the Turks, Arabic and Persian influences became significant in Turkish literature and language. Due to this influence, when the Ottoman Empire expanded into the Balkan Peninsula, many Arabic and Persian words entered the local vocabulary through Ottoman Turkish. During these years, there was also considerable linguistic interaction between Turkish and Bulgarian, particularly in areas such as food terminology, some grammatical structures, kinship names, cultural words, and so on. Since these words entered the Bulgarian language through Ottoman Turkish, they are still considered "Turkish" loans today. Researchers provide different figures regarding the number of Turkish words in Bulgarian. M. Türker Acaroğlu, in his 2016 publication *Dictionary of Words Transferred from Turkish to Bulgarian*, states that the dictionary contains 15,000 words, including variants [Acaroğlu 2016, 3]. On the other hand, Vesela Krasteva, in her book *Dictionary of Turkisms in the Bulgarian Language*, considers the number of commonly used and still relevant words to be 1,200 [Krasteva 2013, 4]. Although these figures vary, the status of the Turkish language in Bulgaria has significantly changed over time due to pressures against the Turkish language.

Turkish words can be encountered in almost every field of the Bulgarian language [Hacı, Zafer 2021]. They are frequently used in both Bulgarian literary works and newspapers. At times, these words are used with negative connotations. When analyzing Bulgarian and Turkish, there are approximately 800 homophones between the two languages [Hacı 2017, 35]. Many of these words are of Turkish origin but have gradually gained different and new meanings, drifting away from their original meanings. These words have been the subject of various studies and are an interesting topic for linguists.

Following Bulgaria's independence, the rise of Bulgarian nationalism led to restrictions on the use of Turkish in public spaces. This process marked the beginning of significant changes for the Turkish community in Bulgaria. Under Ottoman rule, the Turkish language had largely existed freely, but in independent Bulgaria, it was increasingly excluded from the public sphere, especially in education and administration, where it faced serious restrictions. According to the 1878 Berlin Treaty,

minority rights were recognized not only in religious matters but also in linguistic terms [Demiralp 2022, 23]. However, despite these rights, Turkish communities faced pressure, leading to migration from Bulgarian territories. This migration accelerated particularly with the onset of the Balkan Wars.

In 1891, the Bulgarian Ministry of National Education introduced the *Law on Public Education* (*Закон за народно просвещение*), placing Turkish schools, which had been operating independently until then, under state control. According to this law, the curricula of all schools were to be determined by the state, and Bulgarian, the state language, was made compulsory. The same law also affected Greek schools. Although Turkish schools were not shut down immediately, their numbers gradually declined. For instance, while there were 1,720 Turkish schools in 1921, this number dropped to 412 by 1943 [Yenisoy 1996, 14].

The Turkish language during the Communist period (1945–1989)

With the official start of the Communist period in Bulgaria in 1946, the status of the Turkish language was significantly impacted in a negative way. In 1945, the *Işık* ("Light") newspaper began publication, but due to Communist regime policies, its name was changed to *Yeni Işık* ("New Light") in 1953, transforming it into a propaganda tool of the Communist regime [Hacı 2022, 206]. Later, in 1958–1959, Turkish schools were merged with Bulgarian schools [Yenisoy 1996, 18]. Consequently, state schools providing education in Turkish were abolished, dealing a severe blow to Turkish education. Additionally, Turkish theaters, which provided cultural services, were shut down, and the Turkish-language department of the *Narodna Prosveta* ("Public Education") publishing house, which published Turkish textbooks and literary works, was closed.

Although the *Yeni Işık* newspaper continued to be published, it was used for Communist propaganda, and both its content and the Turkish language used in it were edited under strict control. Osman Rauf Alper noted that the Communist regime directly intervened in the Turkish language used in the newspaper [Hacı 2022, 208]. For example, instead of *Bulgaristan* ("Bulgaria", in Turkish), the term *Bulgaria* was preferred. Consequently, significant differences began to emerge between the Turkish used in Bulgaria and the Turkish used in the Republic of Turkey. Efforts to alter the language included eliminating Turkish lessons in schools and intervening in the language used in publications. Further-

more, spoken pressures were exerted to replace standard Turkish with the Kardzhali and Deliorman dialects in the newspaper [Hacı 2022, 208].

While the Bulgarian political regime was closing schools, it also opened a Turkish philology department at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski in 1952–1953. In 1953, Mefküre Mollova started working as an assistant in this department and contributed significantly to the field, writing around 150 articles [Zafer, Muratova 2022, 9]. However, she worked there only until 1961, after which she was dismissed along with her husband. The reason for her dismissal was her opposition to the Communist regime's assimilation policies. Additionally, she was completely omitted from the university's departmental history records [Zafer, Muratova 2022, 9]. Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and Konstantin Preslavski University of Shumen are particularly important institutions for Turkology in Bulgaria. In these universities, Bulgarian scholars have primarily contributed to the field [Yordanova 2017]. The presence of the Turkish language and proper Turkish usage was preserved within such institutions.

In addition to its impact on the Turkish language, the Communist regime imposed severe hardships on Turks. Through its assimilation policies, the regime attempted to forcibly change the names of Turkish and other Muslim communities living in Bulgaria. Moreover, mosques were closed at various times, circumcision ceremonies for children were banned, and these policies led to mass emigration of Turks. The largest migration occurred in 1989, when approximately 360,000[1] people migrated to Turkey. After the fall of the Communist regime at the end of 1989, Muslims who had been forced to change their names were allowed to reclaim them. However, due to years of repression, Turkish people primarily maintained their language within their families.

Today, although Bulgaria, as a member of the European Union, appears to have turned a new page, some policies regarding the Turkish language continue in a limited manner. With the introduction of a 10-minute Turkish news segment on state television, Turks in Bulgaria were once again able to hear their native language on television. Additionally, in some schools, if there is demand and a teacher available, Turkish is offered as an elective course. However, according to official statements, due to low interest, Turkish elective courses are available only in a limited number of schools.

[1] For further information, see: https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/info/infografik/16073 (Accessed: 10.02.2025).

According to the 2021 census, there are 508,378 people in Bulgaria who identify as Turkish, making up 8.4% of the population[2]. Although official statistics report this number, many Bulgarian citizens of Turkish descent who live abroad or did not participate in the census suggest that the actual number is much higher. It is estimated that approximately 700,000 Turks live in Bulgaria, while around 1,000,000 Bulgarian citizens of Turkish origin reside in Turkey.

Language management and language infrastructure in today's Bulgaria

In the previous chapters, we examined the role of the Turkish language in Bulgaria, emphasizing its historical and contemporary significance. We discussed its socio-dynamic implications and the effects these have had on the Turkish-speaking community. In this section, we explore how this historical and social background aligns with the theory of language management. We will highlight specific aspects observed in Bulgaria and analyze their impact on individuals for whom Turkish is their mother tongue.

Broadly speaking, the theory of language management concerns the regulation and treatment of languages across different spheres of society. This theoretical framework has been extensively developed and expanded within Czech sociolinguistics in recent years. In their study, Jiří Nekvapil and Tamah Sherman elaborate on the scope of language management, emphasizing its descriptive nature: "Language management is understood broadly, as any sort of activity aimed at language or communication, in other words, at language as a system as well as at language use (or, put simply, 'behavior toward language' or 'metalinguistic behavior')." [Nekvapil, Sherman 2015, 6].

In the broadest sense, it is about the recognition of bottom-up and top-down processes that are related to one or more languages and that are verbalized. This backdrop helps to determine the infrastructure of a language in more detail. Bettina Braun and Bernhard Brehmer [Braun, Brehmer 2023] call the infrastructure of a language a flow of knowledge and an exchange that is regulated by language. Any language thus acts as a mediator between people and the representation of facts. Similar to an infrastructure in road traffic, it must be built, maintained, and kept up to date. Renewals and improvements are required at regular intervals and the direction in which certain developments are heading must

[2] For further information, see: https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/publications/StatBook_Census2021.pdf (Accessed: 10.02.2025).

be discussed and examined again and again. Such an infrastructure enables people to enter into an exchange with each other, negotiate social conditions, and overcome geographical changes [Braun, Brehmer 2023, 67]. Due to the historical development of standard languages, there is a high-level code that has more favorable possibilities for written use than, for example, spoken varieties, which are subject to social or geographical stratification [Braun, Brehmer 2023, 69]. In our paper, we will point to the written code of standardized language, namely Turkish, because a codified umbrella language serves as an important orientation for all ingroup speakers, and thus structures best the visualization of public space.

With regard to the linguistic reality in Bulgaria, one must bear in mind that its language management provides a certain infrastructure for all languages that play a role in the country or contribute to internationalization (i.e., English). Therefore, language management is a prerequisite for the development of a concrete language infrastructure. In this context, legal framework serves as an orientation, but also as a limitation for the options available to different languages in the country for more background, cf. [Henzelmann 2021, 110]). Basically, all of this has to do with the fact that a distinction is made between the state (or majority) language and the non-state (or minority) language. In Bulgaria, there are legal regulations for this, and they clearly state that Bulgarian is the sole official language, but that there are also opportunities and situations in which other languages are used. The Constitution only mentions the language issue in two articles[3]:

> Art. 3.
> Bulgarian shall be the official language of the Republic.
> Art. 36.
> (1) The study and use of the Bulgarian language shall be a right and an obligation of every Bulgarian citizen.
> (2) Citizens whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian shall have the right to study and use their own language alongside the compulsory study of the Bulgarian language.
> (3) The situations in which only the official language shall be used shall be established by law.

The reason for this unifying approach is that Bulgarian should be the *lingua franca* of all the country's inhabitants and prevent discrimination by favoring a particular other language [Kolev 2017, 326]. The legal framework thus provides for a strict separation between publicly accessible and private communication, as only public language use is

[3] Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria. URL: https://www.parliament.bg/en/const (Accessed: 19.02.2025).

subject to the regulation of languages. How one communicates in private life is not covered by law and is therefore open to all citizens; on the contrary, the learning of other mother tongues is expressly guaranteed in Art. 36 (2). Milena Yordanova highlights this legal contexts and sheds light on the use of Turkish in Bulgaria in media and education: In terms of language training, she gives an overview of the relevance of learning Turkish in higher education. She points out that many universities offer study programs in Turkology [Yordanova 2017, 139]. One of the main reasons is the dense number of speakers, and, therefore, an infrastructure in broadcast and newspapers was created. Bilingual printed editions also have a particular strong tradition in the country. Such examples are the already mentioned newspapers *Yeni Işık* or *Yeni Hayat* (both circulated roughly between 1945 and the beginning of the 1990s), the weekly *Zaman*, which came up in 1992 and is published under the name *Haftaya Bakış* since 2016, or the monthly magazine *Ümit*. The latter was launched in 1995 and used to publish in Turkish only, before changing to a bilingual magazine in 2001 [Yordanova 2017, 140]. Moreover, the Bulgarian National Radio since 1945 has three daily news and advertising emissions, and since 2000 news in Turkish language are produced by the Bulgarian National Television. This infrastructure circulates information in Turkish, and it requires specialists with a good command of the literary language [Yordanova 2017, 140].

Similar to other countries in the region, Bulgaria has neither signed nor ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. This means that the national law is the only guideline for managing other languages than Bulgarian. As we see, education and information in Turkish are largely provided in the country, but there is no legal obligation to include languages other than Bulgarian in public labelling, to fund special promotion programs or to support multilingual projects. Of course, it does leave direct consequences in terms of visibility because that is why we do not see Turkish names on traffic signs, Turkish lettering on administrative buildings or street names in Bulgaria that include the Turkish language. All of this signposting is also lacking in places with a significant Turkish majority, such as around the town of Shumen (Şumnu, in Turkish) in north-eastern Bulgaria, or in the Kardzhali (Kırcaali, in Turkish) region in the south-east of the country. Turkish is therefore primarily a spoken language in Bulgaria, which can be studied through certain teaching programs in schools and used without any restrictions in the private sphere but is not implemented in the public space by the state.

The management of languages in Bulgaria primarily falls under the responsibility of relevant entities that are not directly regulated by the

state, such as cultural associations, mosques, and individuals. To date, the present language management has not led to significant resentment or ethnic tensions in the country, and it is important to emphasize that no such conflicts are currently evident. Interethnic coexistence remains largely peaceful, as clearly noted by members of the Turkish minority, e.g., [Karahasan-Chanar 2004, 217]. Thus, the structural presence of the given language functions as an independent phenomenon. Despite the absence of formal regulations governing language use in non-state domains, various opportunities exist for the public display of the Turkish language in written form. In the following section, we will examine these instances in greater detail.

Visualization and semiotization of the Turkish language in Bulgaria

Having examined the role of Turkish language management in Bulgaria, we now turn to the question of how the visualization and semiotization of public space function for the Turkish language. It is important to note that Turkish holds no official administrative status and can therefore only appear in public spaces within certain domains.

From our perspective, the visibility of a language in the public sphere consists of two fundamental components: visualization and semiotization. Visualization is studied within the framework of linguistic landscapes, while semiotization is analyzed through semiotic landscapes. We will briefly introduce these two theoretical approaches before exploring concrete examples of Turkish language use in Bulgaria.

We begin with the theory of linguistic landscapes (hereafter – LL), which emerged in its modern form in the 1990s. Initially, it sought to explain how issues of linguistic vitality and social hierarchies manifest in public spaces and the geopolitical factors associated with them. LL theory focuses on documenting and interpreting the visibility, perception, and functions of languages within a specific geographical area. This is analyzed through public inscriptions visible to the general public, such as road signs, store notices, billboard advertisements, and inscriptions on monuments. These texts structure the public space and demarcate linguistic boundaries, clearly signalling which language dominates a given (monolingual) area. In contrast, multilingual spaces exhibit different dynamics, where public signage featuring multiple languages indicates the linguistic diversity of a specific region. The presence of multilingual signage allows for the identification of particular geographic territories based on their linguistic composition. As a result, textual elements in signage serve as a key subject of study within LL research.

In a recent monograph, Gorter and Cenoz highlight the diverse focal points used in contemporary LL research. They explain that "the studies consider how linguistic landscapes reflect language demographics, functions of use, power dynamics, ideologies, histories and policies. … <R>esearch includes studies of controlling or influencing what appears on signage with the aim of confirming or contesting existing language practices and hierarchies of prestige." [Gorter, Cenoz 2024, 12].

The primary focus of LLs includes language policy, multilingualism, and minority languages, as well as the growing global influence of English and its implications for language didactics [Gorter, Cenoz 2024]. LL research is therefore fundamentally sociolinguistic in orientation, encompassing the analysis of prominent patterns of language visibility, frequency structures, and usage preferences in multilingual environments. Importantly, LL studies do not concern spoken language but rather the written language documented in specific locations, offering insights into multilingualism through empirical observation. Recent studies have examined LLs across Europe, e.g., [Gorter 2006; Gorter, Cenoz 2024; Lisek, Putzier 2024], the latter with a strong focus on language didactics, and in Southeastern Europe, e.g., [Nedeljković-Pravdić 2021] on Albanian and Serbian in Kosovo; [Giesel 2023] on Slavic-Albanian interactions in Montenegro; [Henzelmann 2024a] on multilingualism in Bulgaria; and [Mısır, Işık Güler 2024] on Turkish digital and social media, among others.

This brings us to the second component that accompanies language visualization: semiotization, which falls under the framework of semiotic landscapes (SL). According to Kreydlin and Krongauz [Kreydlin, Krongauz 2022, 6–7], semiotization refers to the concrete use of language, the signs it contains, and their interpretation. While semiotization can take place in both oral and written forms, our focus here is exclusively on the written form. The key question, then, is how written language is incorporated into public spaces and what semiotic structures emerge as a result. Manar Hammad argues that a specific topos – as part of a given space – creates a syntactic function in the interaction between individuals and their environment. This interaction consolidates concepts of spatial privatization, land ownership, and institutional control over territories [Hammad 2022, 13]. Language patterns are closely linked to this process, as the syntactic function Hammad describes is essentially the visualization of structures that require interpretation. To analyze SLs, we must distinguish between two key categories: "text" and "non-text" [Lukin 2023]. A text exists in written form, is readable, and can be interpreted or critically analyzed based on its linguistic content [Lukin

2023, 85]. However, the absence of a language in public spaces – what Lukin terms a "non-text" – can also serve as a powerful semiotic signal. The deliberate omission of a widely used language can carry significant meaning, indicating exclusion or a shift in linguistic hierarchies [Lukin 2023, 71]. Thus, the semiotic study of language in public spaces must account for both visible and invisible linguistic structures. Traditional LL theory primarily focuses on visibility, making it insufficient for capturing the full semiotic implications of language representation. The absence of a language in public signage can be just as meaningful as its presence, necessitating an analysis that considers both aspects. When semiotic visibility is linked to a broader value system, there is often an implicit assumption that only visible language structures hold significance. While visibility is undoubtedly crucial, it is not the sole determinant of linguistic presence in public spaces and can lead to misinterpretations. SL studies must therefore incorporate an understanding of local socio-historical contexts, including legal frameworks, traditions, and cultural sensitivities, all of which influence both spoken and written language. For example, in the South Slavic region, discussions on language often extend beyond mere visibility to debates about status, prestige, and shifting linguistic affinities. Here, the visualization of written language does not always take precedence; instead, issues of linguistic value and identity hold greater weight [Henzelmann 2024b, 232]. This underscores the necessity of contextualizing semiotic analysis within broader sociopolitical and cultural dynamics.

So far, we have established that the public visibility of languages reflects distinct social and political structures. These structures, in turn, encompass various semiotic components shaped by local contexts and conditions. It is important to note that Turkish holds no official status in Bulgaria and is therefore absent from public buildings, administrative institutions, street signs, and educational establishments. As a result, its presence in the public sphere is confined to specific domains found in various parts of the country. In the following sections, we will examine three key domains where the Turkish language shapes the infrastructure of public space in Bulgaria, analyzing its semiotic structure. Additionally, we will explore the visibility of languages within multimedia contexts, emphasizing the evolving semiotic landscape of Turkish language infrastructure in contemporary Bulgaria[4].

The three visible domains to be discussed below are, first, religious institutions associated with Islam. The majority of Turks in Bulgaria are Sunni Muslims, making Islam a key marker of group identity and

[4] We point out that all photos in this paper were taken by the authors in 2023 and 2024.

a unifying element. As a religion, it not only encompasses spiritual beliefs but also serves as a vehicle for preserving cultural and linguistic traditions. Second, we examine the domain of gastronomy. Turkish restaurants are widespread across Bulgaria, providing spaces where the Turkish language is encountered in various ways. Gastronomy, as an integral part of culture, also intersects with economic factors, influencing the visibility and commercial use of Turkish in public spaces. Third, we explore private businesses and service providers that incorporate Turkish in their operations. Here, the primary focus is on customer engagement and economic interests, highlighting how the Turkish language is utilized as a strategic tool in commercial contexts.

Let us begin with the religious space, which is closely intertwined with Islam. It serves as a spiritual, cultural, and identity-defining domain for the Turkish population in Bulgaria. The organization of Islam in the country primarily encompasses mosques, madrasas, cemeteries, Mufti's offices, and various Muslim educational institutions. The Turkish language plays a significant role in these institutions, as it remains the primary language of communication for many believers in their daily lives. Additionally, it is deeply embedded in religious practices and cultural traditions, reinforcing a sense of communal belonging [Henzelmann 2024a, 306], and teaching Turkish language. As a religion, Islam primarily serves as a spiritual refuge for the community, offering guidance in both faith and daily life. It plays a crucial role in transmitting religious values and education while also shaping social norms, behavioral patterns, and ritual practices, particularly during religious holidays. Through these aspects, Islam fosters a shared cultural identity and strengthens communal ties among its followers.

One example is the signage around the Tombul Mosque in Shumen, one of the cities with the highest percentage of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria. The semiotics of this sacral building was examined in recent study by Dobrin Dobrev who analyses the interior and exterior of the complex. One chapter in his monograph is on the "language of signs" in which the author analyses inscriptions and symbols [Dobrev 2022, 55–110], but the modern signposts at the entrance are not in his focus.

The mosque is surrounded by an old wall. Visitors can enter the courtyard and the building through a gate. There are several signs on the wall in different languages. Next to the entrance gate on the left is a plaque with an inscription in Bulgarian at the top and English at the bottom (see Figure 1). The full name of the Sherif Halil Pasha Mosque, also known as the Tombul Mosque, and the year of foundation, 1744, are mentioned. To the right of the entrance gate is the visually similar

sign with Turkish lettering at the top and Arabic text at the bottom. This symbolizes two-sidedness, which can be interpreted similarly to a coin consisting of two different sides, which merge into one unit. In terms of semiotics, the arrangement of the signs to the right and left of the entrance gate stands for the dual identity of the Bulgarian Turks, who, on the one hand, are Bulgarian citizens and have their home in Bulgaria, but, on the other hand, belong to a culture other than Bulgarian. Thus, passing through the gate in one direction or the other represents the transformation between two cultures. When entering the territory of the mosque, people enter the Islamic-Turkish cultural sphere, and when leaving, they find themselves back in the public space, which geopolitically belongs to Bulgaria and in which Orthodox Christianity is the dominant cultural sphere. This metamorphosis is reinforced by the arrangement of the languages on the inscriptions. On the left-hand panel we see the Bulgarian and English texts, both of which represent Christian cultural spheres, while on the right-hand side the Turkish and Arabic inscriptions refer to the Islamic culture. The arrangement seems to be no coincidence, as Western languages are written from left to right, while the Arabic script, which was also used in Turkey before Atatürk's reforms, is arranged in the opposite direction. If we move both writing directions towards each other, they meet in the middle of the entrance gate and thus at the place that makes the two-sidedness possible. The gate separates and unites at the same time, and stands for greeting and farewell. People who pass through it recognize themselves in a transformation of their own, and the multilingual inscriptions on both sides indicate this.

Figure 1. Signposts at the Tombul Mosque in Shumen in Bulgarian and English on the left and in Turkish and Arabic on the right

The situation is very similar at the Dzhumaya Mosque in Plovdiv (Filibe, in Turkish). This is the central prayer room for local Muslims in the country's second largest city. The proportion of ethnic Turks there is also very high. In addition, Plovdiv is a popular destination for tourists from the nearby neighbouring countries of Turkey and Greece, but also from other places, and is more geared towards an international audience than the above-discussed Shumen, for instance. For this reason, it is not surprising that multilingual or at least English signs are displayed

at numerous buildings of public interest and tourist objects, providing guidelines for visitors. For instance, women are supposed to follow the rules, and because many tourists come from abroad, the information about covering the head is given first in Bulgarian, then in Turkish and then in English (see Figure 2).

Serving as a congregational mosque, the Dzhumaya Mosque is an important religious building. It houses a popular café in the basement, which offers Turkish specialties. Access to the interior is via a staircase, at the end of which is the entrance door. Similar to the Tombul Mosque in Shumen, there are signs on both sides of the door that communicate general information about the building as well as rules of conduct. A sign placed near the entrance area informs about the library. This information is first made in Turkish, then in Bulgarian (see Figure 2). We can see that the arrangement of the languages marks some hierarchy because the language that is most important for the religious community is mentioned first, and not the state language. However, this in no way contradicts the legal situation outlined above, as Bulgarian appears in the illustration. What is symbolically interesting is the arrangement and the presence of multilingualism on the signposts, preferring Turkish in a privileged position.

Visitors to the mosque have the opportunity to move in very different directions after their visit; they are confronted with consumer goods, tourists from all over the world and their languages as well as numerous cultural offerings. Similar to a library with its diversity in books, the use of languages on the sign is an interlinear analogy to the variety of opportunities offered in a city like Plovdiv, which, unlike Shumen, is characterized by greater social diversity and cultural dynamics.

Figure 2. Library and entrance to the mosque in Plovdiv

Figure 3. The cemetery in the village of Podkova

But there is yet another example from the field of Islam in Bulgaria, namely, from the village of Podkova. It is located south of Kardzhali and is home to the extraordinary wooden Yedikizlar Mosque, which was built without a single nail. Here, too, we will find information in both Bulgarian and Turkish at the entrance, but this place has another special feature. There is a cemetery behind the mosque, which is quite large for such a small place. There are a few very old, but mainly modern gravesites, which are rarely more than a hundred years old. The new gravestones erected are almost exclusively inscribed in Turkish (see Figure 3), and in this we recognize a particularly strong semiotic component: While we saw in Figures 1 and 2 that bilingual or multilingual signage can often be observed at the entrance to mosques, the gravestones are inscribed in only one language. What makes it particular? If alive, it is possible to enter and leave the grounds of sacred buildings and thus regularly repeat the transformation between cultures, but the resting places of the deceased are excluded from this. A transformation of the dead body no longer takes place, and the deceased no longer has the opportunity to choose between two cultural speres. There is no turning back for the dead because the place where they reside is fixed for good. That is why, in our semiotic interpretation, we see only one language on the tombstone, which gives the soul a home as it does not have to choose between two cultures or react to geopolitical circumstances. Bi- or multilingualism therefore stands for living in and between two cultures, but this only plays a role during one's lifetime. A person alive is offered two languages and thus two cultural worlds, but after passing away, this fluid and dynamic process disappears, and it is replaced by a static and permanent position without any choice. The latter is labelled by monolingualism.

All in all, we can state that in the case of religious infrastructure, cultural characteristics are in the semiotic foreground. We can see that rules of conduct or general information about the objects clearly dominate the labels in the vicinity of religious institutions. For example, the mosque in Plovdiv is marked with an emphasis on respectful behaviour (see Figure 2), which is absolutely expected and is displayed in several languages due to visitors from different countries. This shows very clearly that practical instructions are geared towards visitors because they express a cultural expectation. Also worth mentioning are the purely informative plaques on the objects, which bear the name and a year, for instance. They contribute to better orientation and emphasize the cultural-historical relevance of the respective objects. Therefore, we see that the important area in which the Turkish language plays a role in the visualization

of the public space symbolizes the *semiotics of the immaterial and the voluntary*. It stands for a cultural community that shares certain values and identifies references related to religious facilities. This immaterial and cultural framework is clearly in the foreground. The financial components, which of course also exist, only play a role when donations are collected, or literature and souvenirs are sold. However, all of this is done on a voluntary basis and is therefore in contrast to the second area we are investigating, namely, gastronomy.

Gastronomy is an important area of public life. Therefore, linguistic structures in and around restaurants form an important basis for studies. In addition to inscriptions and portable signs in the outdoor area, menus or decorations in the interior are also examined and linked to cultural and semiotic constellations. Gorter and Cenoz [Gorter, Cenoz 2024, 71] state that a sign in the outdoor area fulfills a dual function. In addition to providing information about its existence, it can serve as an advertising strategy, too. Then, the sign invites people to rest by and thus to consume.

Turkish snack bars, bakeries, cafés and restaurants are widespread and popular in Bulgaria. We take this opportunity this opportunity to mention an example from Varna. This spa resort on the Black Sea attracts numerous tourists from Bulgaria and abroad in the summer. Tourists act as an important source of income for local catering traders. There are a wide variety of restaurants offering local Bulgarian cuisine as well as specialties from numerous other countries and continents. The Turkish restaurant Orient (see Figure 4) is therefore no exception, but joins a wide range of local culinary offerings.

If we focus only on the outdoor area, we notice that the operators do not advertise with Bulgarian-Turkish motifs, but use images from Turkey, such as pictures from Istanbul. They suggest to potential customers that the location is different, arouse a certain wanderlust and are intended to invite guests on a culinary journey to another place. Unlike religious institutions or movements, restaurants and snack bars can be found on every corner in the city, so they are in a competitive relationship with each other and do not bind an explicit ethno-linguistic group. For this reason, it is important to promote the culinary advantages of Turkish cuisine as a cultural value to attract new customers. However, motifs that exist in Bulgaria are not used for this purpose. A restaurant needs to pursue an advertising strategy to present its cuisine as a cultural and culinary value, but also to market it. Consumption, commerce, and profit are important goals for restaurant owners.

Figure 4. A Turkish restaurant in Varna

These goals can be achieved or optimized through a targeted combination of tangible offerings and intangible benefits. Tangible offerings include the Turkish dishes that are available and sold at fair prices. Turkish culture, being an important attraction for potential customers, on the other hand, is an intangible value. Moreover, there is a strong financial interest, so that we can conclude that the Turkish restaurant stands for a *semiotization of the symbiosis between immaterial and material goods*. In contrast to the religious sphere, the focus is therefore not predominantly on the immaterial but also on the material context. Of course, this can also be stated for other restaurants, but the difference to a Turkish restaurant in Bulgaria also allows the interpretation of the Turkish-Bulgarian synthesis, as this is consolidated by languages, dishes, or other goods from both cultures.

Our third domain is an important area in cultural studies with a focus on language and advertisement. Namely, we will highlight some examples from the private business sector, and we will take a look at its peculiarities in the next paragraph.

Private business is a sector in which the Turkish language is used in Bulgaria. This sector traditionally plays an important role concerning LLs (but not so much regarding SLs). In the broadest sense, it involves the announcement of products and offers, advertising, services, working hours, prices, discounts, or other information that is important to the clientele. In addition, the radius of clients is determined by the fact that private business always addresses certain people. It is for commercial reasons that language in this sector is recognizable, so we can clearly see that every inscription and text is aimed at generating potential clientele. It is obvious that all private stores in Bulgaria provide the key information in the national language, but there is also variation and multilin-

gualism. In the case of multilingual information, different studies on LLs have described "language commodification" [Gorter, Cenoz 2024]. This means, for instance, that a minority language can be used even though it is not officially admitted in the administrative sphere. The reason for this is commercialization, as the minority language may be suitable for the marketing of products. Gorter and Cenoz cite T-shirts, cups, posters, and other souvenirs as examples [Gorter, Cenoz 2024, 219]. However, other motivations may also be in the foreground, such as local identity or environment protection, and this has been shown in various studies on Southeastern Europe. The significance of written communication in private commerce has been examined in some studies in and linked to recent linguistic and semiotic problems [Nedeljković-Pravdić 2021, 167; Henzelmann 2024a, 302]. This is why we also will take a closer look at this domain.

The private commercial sector is always focused on the question of how an offer can be marketed at a profit. To do this, owners and sellers need to focus on consumer behaviour or the needs of target groups, which can be very different. Take bureau and office services, for example, which are entrusted with translations, sworn translations, or certifications. Interpreters or translators working in this sector have undergone special training, and they have to consider not only the language but also the legal system in which their translations are to be valid. In Bulgaria, this group of professionals is already very well prepared for their tasks because they have the opportunity to live or work in a bilingual environment or even speak both Turkish and Bulgarian as their mother tongue.

Figure 5. Private business sector in Razgrad

Translations are not only relevant nationwide but especially in those areas of Bulgaria where a bilingual population lives, such as in Razgrad,

another center of the Turkish minority in the northeastern nook of the country. There is an obvious need for official certifications and translations of documents, such as certificates, testimonials, or proofs, and the Turkish community in particular is made aware of the offer through appropriate signage. Regarding Turkish-language translations, this is interesting for people who need valid proof for Turkey for family, education, or professional reasons. The offer to provide such Bulgarian-Turkish translations is often given in Bulgarian and Turkish in ethnically mixed areas, as can be seen in the signs which were photographed in Razgrad. The Bulgarian language comes first and Turkish second on these signs, other additions such as English are also sometimes conceivable (see Figure 5). What is striking is the completely identical size and content of the lettering and visual design of the Bulgarian and Turkish text material, while the English supplement in Figure 5 appears in abbreviated form. The two most important local languages, which are Turkish and Bulgarian, appear to be of equal rank and thus imply an equality of the languages and, figuratively speaking, also both of the ethnic groups.

Commercial signage differs fundamentally from religious or gastronomic one in terms of visual semiotics. Commerce may explicitly or implicitly incorporate cultural concepts into its sales strategy but is exclusively profit-oriented and is thus about working rentability and generating incomes. This means we are faced to the *semiotics of the material*, in which money, profit, and economic benefits are the main reasons for the use of languages in space. It is about attention and advertising, which in its consequence is supposed to refer new customers to the offer. Applying the Turkish language in Bulgaria, and attracting both Bulgarians and Turkish customers, works better in ethnically mixed cities like Razgrad if not only the state language, but also the language that a significant part of the local population speaks is included.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have addressed the visual infrastructure of the Turkish language in Bulgaria. We have explained why Turkish plays a central role in different constellations in the country and have reflected on the historical and social contexts. We have argued that the Turkish language in Bulgaria has a genuine infrastructure and have observed some areas of the public sphere in which the latter language is used. In our opinion, any space can be interpreted as a "visual text", following a fundamental study by Simyan [Simyan 2022] (and later also by

[Simyan, Makaryan 2023]) because the public space must be structured, decoded, and interpreted in a similar way to a written document.

We argue that Turkish in Bulgaria in the publicly accessible and visible sphere is associated with three main semiotic features. Firstly, it is the religious space with its *semiotics of the immaterial and the voluntary*. This is primarily about cultural and spiritual contexts that are sold using the Turkish language. Secondly, we observe a combination of cultural and monetary backgrounds activated with reference to the Turkish language and motifs from Turkey. We believe that this symbolizes the cohesion of Turkish and Bulgarian cultures, and it creates a *semiotization of the symbiosis between immaterial and material goods*. Thirdly, we discuss inscriptions, especially on some commercial facilities. Such are offices that sell services and achieve economic benefits. In this area, a profit-oriented background explains the use of writing, and, therefore, we speak about the *semiotics of the material*.

The study has shown that the Turkish language in Bulgaria serves a niche infrastructure in the visualization of public space due to its absence from the administrative sphere. Nevertheless, the language appears where there is a sufficiently large ethnic Turkish community. If the community's alterity is represented by linguistic means, then this serves practical purposes that respond to cultural, cultural-commercial, or commercial practices that are oriented towards the needs of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria.

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Материал поступил в редакцию 21.02.2025