

6. Linguistic Landscape between Concrete Signs and Citizens' Perceptions

Exploring Sociolinguistic and Semiotic Differences in Neighbourhoods of Florence⁵

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'Florence is alive and its soul is not all in paintings and palaces. It speaks with each one of us in a *language* as simple and understandable as the mother tongue' (our emphasis). Pavel Muratov wrote these words at the beginning of the 20th century. He described Florence as one of the most beautiful cities in the world, a place that one easily feels is one's own.

The focus of this chapter is on the linguistic landscape (henceforth LL), the set of linguistic and semiotic signs and messages displayed in public spaces (Gorter 2006; Shohamy 2018). Given its potential to reflect and emphasise sociolinguistic and functional changes in neighbourhood structures it could be used as a litmus test of multiple phenomena. The aim of our research was to explore the LL of Florence, the capital city of the Tuscany region (Italy), to find out *which language* this city currently speaks in its neighbourhoods and in its contradictions, and how its inhabitants perceive this *language*.

We chose to explore the LL of Florence because, as will be seen, the city has undergone numerous changes over the last decades. Migration flows, gentrification and touristification processes, the COVID-19 pandemic are just some of the factors that have led to upheavals both in the urban structure of certain neighbourhoods and at a demographic and social level.

In particular, we addressed the following research questions:

- What are the linguistic, semiotic, and discursive characteristics of the Florentine LL?
- How and for what reasons does the LL vary in different neighbourhoods?

5. Bagna was responsible for the introductory section; Bellinzona for the following sections: *The Linguistic Landscape: Discursive Practices, Place Semiotics and Poles of the Linguistic Space, The City of Florence, Research Methodology and Data, Research Areas, Results and Discussion, and Other Languages in the Linguistic Landscape*; Monaci for section *English in the Linguistic Landscape*; the *Conclusion* is shared.

- To what degree are Florentine citizens aware of the visibility of languages in different neighbourhoods of the city?

In the next paragraphs we first present the theoretical framework, then we describe the context of the study, the methodology and the research tools, paying attention to the characteristics of the neighbourhoods under investigation. After that, we discuss the results: first we give a general overview of the discourses exhibited in the different districts, and then we focus on and seek to explain the visibility (or not) of the languages that are part of the Florentine linguistic space.

6.1 *The Linguistic Landscape: Discursive Practices, Place Semiotics and Poles of the Linguistic Space*

The urban LL has long been considered the ideal place from which to present an overview of linguistic situations in varying contexts. Gorter (2006) describes the LL as 'a new approach to multilingualism'. However, holistic and transversal exploration of 'multiple forms of languages'⁶ necessitates reference to multidimensional analytical and interpretative models.

The notion of linguistic space, introduced by De Mauro (1980) and taken up by Vedovelli (2011), among others, is a good starting point. It derives from the idea of linguistic competence, understood as the ability of individuals to choose the language they use and to follow the rules in accordance with the context. The term 'space' refers to a heterogeneous and multifaceted set of idiomatic realities that interact in a dynamic way. Linguistic competence is not understood in a vertical sense (in relation to standard Italian) in this model, it rather reflects the ability to move and to *navigate* within the linguistic space.

Linguistic space, although initially conceived of as a model of individual competence, also concerns collective and social facts, meaning the varieties and registers available to a linguistic community in a range of languages. In this sense, it could be defined as a descriptor of the collective linguistic repertoire referring, in the present context of the idiomatic configuration of Italian in its entirety, to a paradigm of sociolinguistic analysis. This purports not only to identify, but also to reconstruct the heritage of collective linguistic uses (Vedovelli 2011: 138). The present-day linguistic space of Italy comprises at least five dimensions or poles, namely Italian, dialects, minority languages, immigrant languages and foreign languages used for international communication (Vedovelli 2011; Bellinzona 2021). This diversity, frequently denied or, conversely, intensified based on political and economic ideologies and interests, can only be reflected in the LL, a carnival mirror of the roles played by languages in societies (Gorter 2012).

LL studies conducted in various Italian cities have purported to explore the linguistic space, sometimes offering holistic descriptions and discussions, but more often focusing on single linguistic poles. In this regard we refer, *inter alia*, to the works of Gorla (2012) on dialects, Griffin (2004) on English, Tufi (2013) on minority languages and Bagna, Barni & Vedovelli (2007) on immigrant languages.

6. See <https://benjamins.com/catalog/ll> (13/10/2023).

Of course, studying sociolinguistic variation in the LL, as demonstrated in this volume, requires reflection that transcends the level of language to cover the entire 'semiotic aggregate' (Scollon & Scollon 2003). In this sense, the analysis must concern 'the material world and the place that language finds in it' (Scollon & Scollon 2003: 111).

Within the theoretical framework of geosemiotics, and more specifically of place semiotics, the interpretation of visible signs in urban space cannot ignore a series of elements, starting from code preference (meaning the relationship between two or more languages on bi- or multilingual signs) and the type of multilingual arrangement (Reh 2004). Determination of the preference for, or dominance of one language over others requires consideration of the position of languages on signs as well as inscriptions, in other words all systems of meaning that are based on the physical materiality of language and signs in the world, such as layering, status changes, font (Dal Negro 2009; Gorter & Cenoz 2015) and material (Stroud & Mpendukana 2009; Blommaert 2013; Cook 2015). As Backhaus (2007) and Huebner (2006) (*inter alia*) observed, only by aggregating all these semiotic elements is it possible to establish the dominance of one language over others in a sign.

Another major issue in geosemiotics is emplacement, the material location of the signs. The physical placement of a sign in the concrete, material world has a strong influence on its meaning, combined with the discourse(s) it conveys. Scollon & Scollon (2003: 210) define such discourse 'in the narrow sense, language in use; in the broader sense, a body of language use and other factors that form a 'social language'. Signs in geosemiotic analyses of urban space may belong to various discursive categories – regulatory, infrastructural, commercial, or transgressive – which are overlapping, complementary or oppositional, reflecting (social) changes taking place and, in turn, influencing them.

6.2 *The City of Florence*

Florence has 368,419 inhabitants (Istat 2021) living in an area of 102.32 km². Administratively, the city is divided into five districts: District 1, corresponding to the Historic Centre; District 2, 'Campo di Marte' in the north-east; District 3, 'Gavinana-Galluzzo' in the south-east; District 4, 'Isolotto-Legnaia' in the south-west, and District 5, 'Rifredi', in the north-west. The number of immigrants residing in the city has expanded in recent decades. In fact, 55,139 foreigners were residing in the municipality of Florence in 2020, an incidence of 15.86 per cent of its population and somewhat higher than the Italian average of about 8.7 per cent. The migratory component is not distributed evenly among the various city districts: according to the Migrants Report (Comune di Firenze 2021), District 5 (34.20%) and District 1 (23.03 %) have the most immigrants, followed by District 2 (20.18%), District 4 (14.56%) and District 3 (8.03%). The five most common nationalities are Romanian (14.14%), Chinese (10.67%), Peruvian (9.66%), Albanian (8.45%) and Ukrainian (8.31%).

Florence is also one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. Precisely because of these tourist flows, however, there is an ongoing process of touristification (Gotham 2005). Defined in many newspapers as the *glossy Renaissance luxury town*, a

city showcase, the *Las Vegas of tourism*, *Renaissance Disneyland*, it is transforming both its commercial and its residential offer. Tourism gentrification, or touristification, is 'a process of socio-spatial change in which neighbourhoods are transformed according to the needs of affluent consumers, residents and visitors alike' (Gant 2015: 4). This may be one result of specific institutional placemaking policies (Lees, Slater & Wyly 2013), but it also reflects an autonomously developing demand for tourist locations (Gant 2016).

According to the data processed by the Florence Tourist Studies Centre, the general flows in 2018 reached 5.3 million arrivals, and just under 15.5 million presences. This kind of pressure has significant consequences for the city and, above all, for its historic centre.

The consequences of the gentrification or touristification process became even more evident when the same tourist flows came to a halt because of the COVID-19 pandemic: economic crises, bankruptcies and closures have exposed the fragility of the system. As Camarlinghi et al. (2021) point out, the pandemic has made the city an orphan of tourists, giving it the opportunity to redefine and live itself in a different way. In fact, the pandemic has affected all aspects of life, changing the way people engage with each other, do their work, and spend their leisure time, as well as how technology is used, and life is lived in cities and neighbourhoods in general.

6.3 Research Methodology and Data

The purpose of this research was twofold: on the one hand it was to explore the LL of Florence in 2021; and on the other hand, it was to analyse citizens' perceptions related both to the functional differences of the neighbourhoods and to the LL and its characteristics. We considered it necessary to analyse the perceptions of citizens for two reasons: first because, as highlighted in Peck, Stroud & Williams (2018), the LL consists not only of languages and signs, but also and above all of people, of those who conceive, perceive, and live these spaces, signs and languages (Lefebvre 1991). Secondly because of the administrative subdivisions of Florence, which are somewhat problematic for LL research. Each of the five city districts extends considerably, which makes complete mapping challenging, and they are further divided into urban areas that comprise numerous neighbourhoods with borders that are not clearly defined. It is advisable to choose specific and well-defined areas because, as Huebner (2006: 32) points out, each city area has its own linguistic culture, soul and identity that distinguish it from the others.

For these reasons, we arranged focus-group meetings with citizens of Florence (Gibbs 1997; Finch, Lewis & Turley 2003). One advantage of focus groups is that, unlike individual interviews, they allow for a variety of points of view and emotional responses, thereby stimulating interaction, discussion, and comparison. The results of these focus-group meetings were useful both to identify the neighbourhoods to map and, above all, to explore perceptions and awareness of the LL and the visible languages.

The focus groups met during the months of March and April in 2021, at a time when the COVID-19 infection curve in Italy made mobility and, above all, meeting people difficult. For this reason, the meetings were conducted online via the Meet

platform (Stewart & Williams 2005; Gaiser 2008; Stewart & Shamdasani 2015) (see Chapter 2, Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 in this volume for other ways of adapting the research design and the data collection to the pandemic).

During the meetings various topics were discussed, in accordance with the two objectives already outlined. The questions posed by the researchers concerned the city of Florence as a whole, the division into neighbourhoods (discussed with the support of a map), the urban and social transformations of the city, the relationship of the interviewees with the city itself and with the different neighbourhoods, the LL (perception and awareness, changes, multilingualism, street art, inclusion/exclusion phenomena). Despite having an interview guide, however, the conversations followed different paths from time to time, adapting to the suggestions and reflections of the participants.

The citizens involved in the study were selected in accordance with various criteria to give us a varied sample in terms of age, gender, job position, socio-cultural level, educational qualifications, language skills, as well as inhabited and frequented areas of Florence. We formed six focus groups (in addition to a seventh pilot group), each one comprising a minimum of two and a maximum of five participants.⁷ 21 people, whose essential characteristics we collected in advance via a questionnaire on Google Forms, took part in the study: 10 men and 11 women; one participant was under 25 years old, 13 aged between 26 and 35, two between 36 and 45, two between 46 and 55, and three over 56. Seven people lived in District 1, six in District 2, and two each in Districts 3, 4 and 5.

Each meeting was audio- and video-recorded and the corpus of data collected amounted to about 216 minutes, which after being transcribed was subjected to qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2004) with NVivo 11 Pro (Bazeley & Jackson 2013).

We selected five districts as areas to be mapped (see the section *Research Areas*), which we explored on linguistic walks taken between September and November 2021, on weekdays and during working hours.⁸

The mapping extended over the entire area of neighbourhoods and bearing in mind the semiotic aggregate, therefore without limiting the collection of data to a specific type of sign. In line with what Cenoz & Gorter (2006) propose, the entire establishment was taken as a unit of analysis, such that 'each text belongs to a larger whole instead of being clearly separated' (Cenoz & Gorter 2006: 71, cf. Chapter 4, Chapter 5 and Chapter 7 in this volume). Nonetheless, we conducted microanalyses of the individual signs that comprised the units. Given our research objectives, it seemed appropriate to consider the LL data from different perspectives, both quantitative and qualitative. The annotation grid, which we derived from the literature review (Scollon & Scollon 2003; Reh 2004; Barni & Bagna 2009; Spolsky 2009; Savela 2018; Bellinzona 2021 *inter alia*), includes references to numerous aspects and taxonomies related to the linguistic, semiotic, and thematic characteristics.

7. All the meetings were conducted in Italian but, for practical reasons, excerpts from the interviews are presented also in the English translation.
8. With regard to the evolution of the pandemic, we should point out the reduction in infections during the months of the survey, which coincided with a (temporary) resumption of mobility and, in part, of social and commercial activities.

Scan the QR-code or visit
<https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe202402136963>
to view a high resolution map.

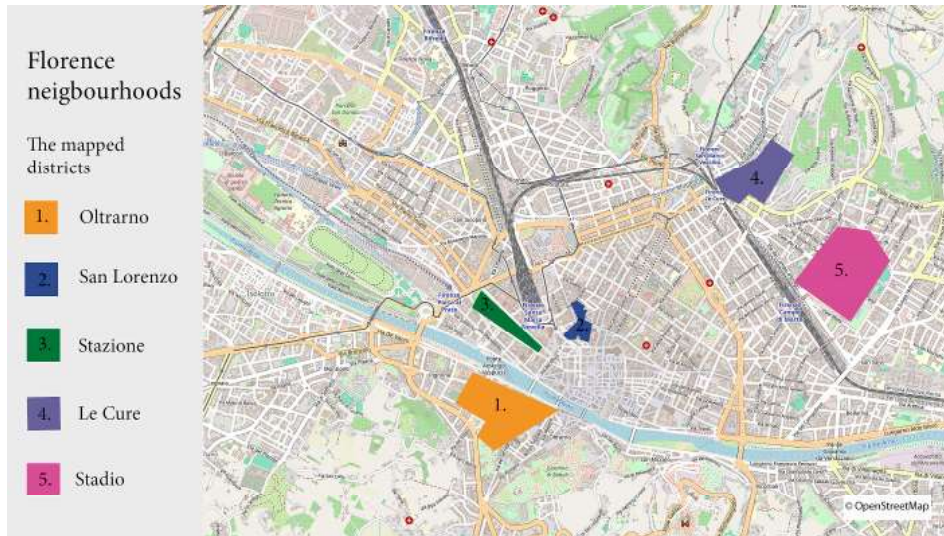


Figure 1. The research areas. © OpenStreetMap, <https://www.openstreetmap.org>

6.4 Research Areas

The focus-group analysis led to the coding of 346 references of variable length, which were synthesised in 57 tree and child nodes. We named the three tree nodes 'History and perceptions of the city of Florence' (Node 1), 'The subdivision of the city into neighbourhoods' (Node 2) and 'Awareness of the Linguistic Landscape' (Node 3). The encodings related to the first two nodes led to the identification of the five districts of Florence that we mapped: Oltrarno, Santa Maria Novella Station area and San Lorenzo in *District 1 – Historic Centre*; Le Cure and the Stadium area in *District 2 – Campo di Marte*. The map in Figure 1 shows the location and extent of these areas.

We chose the areas in line with the objectives of the study, and therefore investigated areas that were sociolinguistically and functionally different. The following brief description synthesises the results of the focus-group analysis and the historical and sociological surveys (Loda 2006; Zini & Lebole 2007; Burroni 2017 *inter alia*).

The Oltrarno area, coloured in orange, is part of the historic centre of the city, despite being across the Arno River. It is rather extensive, with much to admire including monuments known all over the world, such as the Pitti Palace and the Boboli Gardens. All these contribute to making the area a tourist destination. The streets of Oltrarno are also known for their workshops occupied by artisans, goldsmiths, and restorers, which makes them seem like vestiges of ancient Florence, ensuring the maintenance and conservation of Florentine life. As C. (focus group 1) stated (1), for example:

- (1) C.: I have had furniture restored in recent years and it [Oltrarno – ed] is an environment almost with rules of bygone times. When you go to these places [to restoration craftsmen – ed] you must be introduced by a person trusted by the dealer, you have to act respectfully.⁹

The area is also popular among young Florentines for its nightlife, at least it was in pre-pandemic times. It is therefore an area with strong internal contradictions: on the one hand it leans towards globalisation, tourism, and modernity; on the other hand, there is strong resistance to this from the inhabitants, who try to preserve the historic characteristics of the neighbourhood.

Represented in blue on the map is the district of San Lorenzo, which is named after the famous Basilica that is at its heart. It is an area that is strongly affected by tourist flows, directed towards the church and the nearby central market square, around which is one of the characteristic city markets that mainly sell leather products. It is an area in which one can appreciate the latest applications of ancient crafts, as G. (focus group 1) explained (2):

- (2) G.: There are still some *civaie* in the San Lorenzo area, where *civaioli*, sellers of dried legumes and cereals by weight, still work.¹⁰

Conversely, the area is one of those in the historic centre accommodating the most inhabitants with a migratory background, who have chosen it for commercial and residential reasons.

The area adjacent to Santa Maria Novella station is characterised by an even stronger presence of immigrants. It comprises two streets (via della Scala and via Palazzuolo), coloured green on the map. As M. (focus group 3) observed (3):

- (3) M.: It is very multicultural, there are various shops of different ethnicities, markets and mini markets, hairdressers of various types, afro or otherwise, shops selling food, butchers ... it is quite diverse in terms of area and population [...] There are mostly foreign people and shops.¹¹

The area of Le Cure, on the other hand, is purely residential: it is in District 2, coloured purple on the map. It is a strategic area, immediately adjacent to the historic centre and not far from Campo di Marte station. We chose this neighbourhood not only because of its residential status, but also because it is particularly representative of graffiti and street art. In fact, the wide pedestrian underpass in the main square is constantly updated with new works and murals: every month the walls are repainted to make room for other artists.

9. Original: *Ho fatto restaurare negli anni scorsi dei mobili negli ultimi anni e questo [l'Oltrarno – ndr] è un ambiente quasi con regole di altri tempi. Quando si va in questi posti [dagli artigiani restauratori – ndr] bisogna essere presentati da una persona di fiducia del commerciante, bisogna comportarsi con rispetto.*

10. Original: *Ci sono ancora alcune civaie nella zona di San Lorenzo, dove lavorano i civaioli, i venditori di legumi secchi e cereali a peso.*

11. Original: *È molto multiculturale, ci sono vari negozi di diverse etnie, mercati e mini market, parrucchieri di vario tipo, afro o meno, negozi alimentari, macellerie... è abbastanza diversificata come zona e come popolazione [...] Ci sono soprattutto persone e negozi stranieri.*

The last district we mapped, in pink on the map, is adjacent to the Stadium. There are also *free walls* on which street art is accommodated. The Stadium area is also a place in which various segments of the population meet, with numerous sports and other facilities: the building that used to be a venue for concerts and events was converted into a vaccination hub during the pandemic.

6.5 Results and Discussion

In total, 762 units of analysis of the LL were collected during the survey. The LLs under scrutiny turned out to be environments with both common and divergent characteristics. Neighbourhood differences emerged, first, from the quantitative data on the type of area, primarily commercial or residential. Table 1 shows the absolute values relating to the number of units analysed, distributed according to the district and the context (commercial, transgressive, or other).

Units of analysis that are *out of place*, such as graffiti and elements of street art, fall under the label 'transgressive units'. We included top-down regulatory, promotional and infrastructural discourses under the label 'top-down units'. Discourses related to available activities, products and various sponsored events are included under the label 'commercial units'.

In most cases these represent commercial establishments with complex units of analysis comprising several signs. We thought it would be useful (given the discussion to follow) also to report absolute numbers and percentages of signboards, (Table 2), placed in the upper part of the windows and usually indicating the name and/or type of business. Furthermore, again given the commercial context, we took account of the presence of discourses related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as regulatory signs indicating measures to be respected to limit the spread of the virus (see also Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 in this volume).

Table 1. The distribution of the units of analysis based on district and domain

	Commercial signs	Transgressive signs	Top-down signs	Total
Oltrarno	258 (77%)	33 (10%)	42 (13%)	333 (44%)
San Lorenzo	66 (94%)	3 (4%)	1 (2%)	70 (9%)
Station	77 (75%)	10 (10%)	15 (15%)	102 (13%)
Le Cure	98 (54%)	72 (39%)	13 (7%)	183 (24%)
Stadium	21 (29%)	21 (29%)	32 (42%)	74 (10%)
Total	520 (68%)	139 (18%)	103 (14%)	762 (100%)

Table 2. The distribution of different typologies of commercial signs (signboards and COVID-19-related signs) based on district.

	Commercial units		
	Tot.	Signboards	COVID-19
Oltrarno	258	134 (52%)	91 (35%)
San Lorenzo	66	62 (94%)	12 (18%)
Station	77	63 (82%)	11 (14%)
Le Cure	98	81 (83%)	27 (27%)
Stadium	21	10 (48%)	0 (0%)
Total	520	350 (67%)	141 (27%)

Among the most obviously present domains in the LL is, as expected, the strictly commercial, which is predominant in the historic centre (Oltrarno, San Lorenzo and Station) and, to a lesser extent, in Le Cure. A high percentage of units (39%) in the latter district turned out to belong to the transgressive domain, which was also strongly present in the Stadium area (29%) where top-down units were nevertheless predominant (42%).

Relevant data on the commercial LL relates to the characteristics of the individual signs that make up the units of analysis. As the data in the table shows, most shops in all the mapped areas except Oltrarno were equipped with signboards. In Oltrarno, however, almost half of the shops communicated information to the public either through linguistic elements present directly on the window, or through a silent LL (only 52% of the commercial establishments had a signboard). This was also the case in numerous art galleries, artisan shops and restoration shops in the neighbourhood. As C. (focus group 1) explained (4):

- (4) C.: When you pass these places, they do not even attract attention: from the perspective of marketing, visibility, perhaps things to which we, I mean young people, are more sensitive. You pass them and at best they seem like invisible businesses, at worst they seem really bad places that you don't want to enter.¹²

The name of the business is usually shown on the signboard or on the window, whereas other information is placed on the façades of the businesses in the form of stickers, sheets of paper, posters, murals and blackboards. These texts range from information related to opening hours to communications among inhabitants of the

12. Original: *Quando si passa davanti a questi luoghi non attirano nemmeno l'attenzione: dal punto di vista del marketing, della visibilità, forse cose a cui noi, intendo i giovani, siamo più sensibili. Ci si passa davanti e nel migliore dei casi sembrano attività commerciali invisibili, nel peggiore dei casi sembrano posti davvero brutti, in cui non si vuole entrare.*

neighbourhood concerning the menu of the day and requests for social justice, from promotional information about events organised in the area to rules aimed at limiting the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The discourse on COVID-19 (explored in depth in Bagna & Bellinzona 2023), which is in evidence in the commercial LL in all neighbourhoods in the form of a handbook of accepted, recommended and prohibited behaviour, also emerges in the transgressive LL. This domain is particularly receptive to social and current issues, which are perceived as more urgent. This is exemplified in photos 1 and 2 in Figure 2 (Le Cure). In the former, entitled 'Antibody against hatred', the pandemic and its lexicon constitute the starting point encouraging people to reflect on other issues. The latter photo is of two posters designed to promote an event: one hand is squeezing the dome of Florence Cathedral as if it were an orange, and beside it is the text, 'Squeezing Florence: that's enough!'. The event has the slogan, 'We won't get back to normality because normality was the problem': it is a protest linked to the effects of tourism on the social fabric of the city, which is made even more evident by the pandemic that has emptied Florence of tourists, thus triggering a severe economic crisis.

Whereas it is possible to find protest discourses in the Le Cure underpass, the Stadium area is different. There are ice cream shops with signboards in purple, the colour of the city's football team, pizzerias named 'Offside', street names reflecting sporting events and personalities, themed paintings, and murals: the entire LL emphasises the neighbourhood obsession, namely the culture of sport. Photo 3 (Figure 2) is an example of a mural that emphasises the ability of sport to unite and to promote integration.

Photo 4 (Figure 2) is of one of the numerous signs documented in Oltrarno that convey protest/solidarity discourses. In fact, there is a poster promoting mutual aid among inhabitants of the neighbourhood in terms of food support.



Figure 2. Discourses in the Florentine LL. Pictures: Carla Bagna, Martina Bellinzona and Viola Monaci.

It is therefore clear how discourses with differing content meet and collide in LLs, encouraging each neighbourhood to take on a distinctive aspect. However, the discourses do not rely totally on images and texts: languages, as powerful semiotic devices, are also able to convey meanings.

In terms of linguistic diversity, we documented occurrences in 15 languages, in addition to Italian, and a total of 392 monolingual and 272 bilingual units, and 33 presenting texts in three or more languages. Even from a linguistic perspective, each district had its own characteristics. In the following paragraphs we consider the peculiarities of each language and each area, focusing first on the visibility of English and then shifting to other languages.

6.5.1 ENGLISH IN THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

Florence is a city which speaks English. On the quantitative level, traces of English were documented in 327 occurrences, equal to about 43 per cent of the total. Of these, 50 were monolingual units of analysis, 245 bilingual (in 104 of which English was the dominant language) and 32 were multilingual (in 12 of which English was dominant). However, the perceptions of informants in the focus groups were quite different, as evidenced in what G. (focus group 2) stated (5):

- (5) G.: I honestly don't [notice the presence of the English language – ed], maybe only in the graffiti [...] At most you can see this language a little more in areas where migrants reside, but not in Florence.¹³

According to this testimony, therefore, the English language is not visible within the Florentine LL, except sometimes in Street Art or in areas affected by the presence of immigrants and foreign residents, as a form of linguistic facilitation. F. (focus group 5) also referred to the absence of the English language (6):

- (6) F.: Especially with English then ... that is, in restaurants you may find more particular languages, but English, French, just not. Maybe something in Spanish...¹⁴

In short, in her view, English would not be used in the commercial field because it is not considered interesting and does not transmit positive semiotic values. However, the results of the LL analysis paint a very different picture, as shown in Table 3.

The presence of the English language affects the commercial domain the most, especially in the districts of the historic centre (Oltrarno, San Lorenzo and Station). It is even visible in Le Cure, especially in the transgressive sphere. The district in which it is most visible in percentage terms is the Station, which is not surprising given that it is a transit area frequented by tourists, with numerous luggage storage areas and facilities for exchanging money. The very function of these places requires them to display information in English, as R. observed (focus group 1) (7):

13. Original: *Sinceramente non [noto la presenza della lingua inglese – ndr], forse solo nei graffiti [...] Al massimo si vede un po' di più questa lingua nelle zone dove vivono gli immigrati, ma non a Firenze.*
 14. Original: *Soprattutto con l'inglese poi... cioè, nei ristoranti si possono trovare lingue più particolari, ma inglese, francese, proprio no. Forse qualcosa in spagnolo...*

Table 3. The visibility of English in the Florentine LL¹⁵

	Commercial signs			Transgressive signs	Top-down signs	Total
	Tot.	Signboards	COVID-19			
Oltrarno	125 (49%)	51 (37%)	9 (10%)	7 (21%)	13 (31%)	145 (44%)
San Lorenzo	32 (48%)	25 (42%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	32 (46%)
Station	43 (56%)	30 (50%)	3 (27%)	4 (40%)	8 (32%)	55 (54%)
Le Cure	35 (36%)	15 (20%)	0 (0%)	35 (49%)	6 (46%)	76 (41%)
Stadium	2 (18%)	1 (14%)	0 (0%)	4 (19%)	12 (29%)	19 (26%)
Total	237 (46%)			50 (36%)	39 (38%)	327 (43%)

- (7) R.: English seems to be the dominant language in some businesses, such as currency exchange and souvenir shops. D [another participant in the focus group – ed] rightly spoke of restaurants and this is the case mainly in places where tourism is stronger.¹⁶

With regard to the multilingual strategy evident in units of analysis in which two or more languages were documented, English was used to complement other languages, especially Italian, in 146 units, in an overlapping manner in 94 units, and as a duplicate language in only 24 cases. It is worth pointing out that, in most cases, duplicated texts were used on top-down signs, posted by the municipal or regional authority. Photo 1 in Figure 3 shows an example of this, namely an institutional sign with an informative function aimed at tourists, outlining the history and characteristics of a church in Oltrarno.

Although in most cases it was not difficult to identify specific named languages on the signs because they tended to be highlighted graphically in a different way or markedly divided, mixed and hybrid linguistic use was observed on some signs (see also Chapter 3 in this volume). This may have reflected an imbalance in language skills, or it could have been part of a creative strategy to create funny and captivating names in which the pun is rendered by blending different languages. The restaurant in photo 2 (Figure 3 – Le Cure) is a case in point: the name chosen for the place, 'Beerbante', plays on the assonance of the English word beer – / 'bɪr / (one of the varieties offered by the business, indicated on the icon above the photo) and the first part of the Italian word birbante – / bir' bante /, a maliciously or playfully spiteful, but also crafty and shrewd person.

15. The percentages shown in brackets refer to the total in the respective category, as shown in Table 1 and 2.

16. Original: *L'inglese sembra essere la lingua dominante in alcune attività commerciali, come il cambio valuta e i negozi di souvenir. D. [un altro partecipante al focus group – ndr] ha parlato giustamente di ristoranti e questo avviene soprattutto nei luoghi dove il turismo è più forte.*

On the other hand, the commercial sphere linked to leather goods is not very creative on the linguistic level. Florence is well-known for its leather products, and San Lorenzo and part of Oltrarno are full of shops selling leather goods (see, for example, photo 3 in Figure 3 – Oltrarno). Eighty-one per cent of the analysed units relating to leather goods were mono- or bilingual, with English texts that tended to comprise the single word ‘leather’. The choice of English in this case was tourism-related.

There are several reasons why English is used in other types of business, however. An example is given by shops that offer technological services and hairdressers. Both categories of commercial establishments have above-average usage of English, 86 and 63 per cent, respectively, of the total. Hence, in addition to presenting signs rich in texts and therefore with a strong information density, they tend to use the English language. Although Italian is often used with reference to the services and products offered, the name of the shop is in English, which is commonly considered the language of technology and, as such, implies that the shop is part of the international scene. Similarly, hairdressers (as well as vintage and other shops in the clothing sector) tend to define themselves by using English, which (as a semiotic system) conveys values linked to modernity, trendiness, and fun.



Figure 3. Examples of English usage in the LL. Pictures: Carla Bagna, Martina Bellinzona and Viola Monaci.

A final element that we should highlight relates to the preponderance of English in signs belonging to commercial businesses run by people with a migratory background. Photo 4 in Figure 3 (Oltrarno) is of a mini market, whose owners are of Asian origin, and there is no space for languages other than Italian and English. The presence or absence of other languages in the Florentine LL is the subject of the discussion in the next paragraph.

6.5.2 OTHER LANGUAGES IN THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

The quantitative analysis showed that languages other than English and Italian were hardly visible in the LL of the various districts: in total, only 80 units of analysis (10% of the total) have occurrences in other languages (Table 4).

Table 4. The distribution of other languages in the mapped districts

	Arabic	Chinese	Dialects	Fr, Germ, Sp	Other ¹⁷	Total
Oltrarno	2	3	11	9	6	28 (9%)
San Lorenzo	4	1	2	1	3	9 (13%)
Station	3	4	7	12	3	29 (28%)
Le Cure	0	4	1	3	1	9 (5%)
Stadium	0	0	0	1	4	5 (7%)
Total	9	12	21	26	17	80 (10%)

The first point worth noting is the overlap between the number of units of analysis with occurrences in other languages and neighbourhoods with a particularly heavy presence of immigrant communities or substantial tourist flows (San Lorenzo, Station and Oltrarno). This further confirms the indicative function of the LL (Scollon & Scollon 2003), namely to convey content to various readers in a usable manner (Spolsky & Cooper 1991; Ben-Rafael 2009).

At the same time, there is a mismatch between the visible languages and the languages (probably) spoken among the communities residing in the territory. Even this data is not unexpected: as Vandenbrouke (2015) argues, the direct visibility-vitality correlation is no longer supported by empirical data in light of the sociolinguistic changes taking place in present-day societies. The participants of the focus groups also noticed this, in some cases providing their own interpretations of the phenomenon: as P. (focus group 1) remarked (8):

- (8) P.: I have not happened to see anything in Spanish or Romanian, perhaps because they [the languages – ed] are not so dissimilar from our language; perhaps they

17. The label 'Other' includes Japanese (6), Hindi (2), Russian (2), Turkish (2), Bengali (1), Sinhalese (1), Latin (1), Dutch (1) and Thai (1).

[the speakers – ed] prefer to learn Italian and use that, although there is a fairly strong Peruvian community in Florence, I think.¹⁸

Later during the discussion, however, P. shifted the focus to other languages, namely Arabic and Chinese, which he described as very visible in the urban LL (9). He explained their distribution as follows:

- (9) P.: So, connected to the fact that the signs are often in other languages, it is because older foreigners have not integrated.¹⁹

The data we collected contradicts this stereotype. As we observed the presence of Arabic in the LL, for example, we noticed that it was always as a duplicate, or overlapping with Italian (photo 1 in Figure 4 – Station area), added as a complement to communicate untranslatable information, in particular in relation to *halal* foods. We should add that the presence of Arabic is marginal not only on signboards but also on other signs placed on shop windows, which have a regulatory or promotional function.

Another text worth mentioning was documented in Oltrarno (see photo 2 in Figure 4). It is a poster containing information about an anti-eviction group that was active in the area, the aim of which was to help people and families in difficulty. The text is presented, duplicated, in Italian, Arabic and English, and the linguistic choices, added to the content of the message, produce a discourse of solidarity, not only among the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, but also between members of different linguistic communities. However, it is noteworthy that the English translation is faithful to the Italian text, whereas there are numerous errors in the Arabic version, both in the spelling (for example, the word committee was written *اجته* instead of *لجنة*, probably confusing the letters ج and ل, and ن and ت which, on the keyboard, are adjacent to each other), and in the grammar and punctuation.

We also noted an error in the sign shown in photo 3, Figure 4 (Oltrarno): instead of duplicating the English text, ‘San tea house’, the Chinese text states ‘Tea room of the eighth grade’. The presence of Chinese in our corpus, as of Arabic, is limited. Occurrences in Chinese refer to commercial signs, mainly in restaurants. F. (focus group 2) suggested an interpretation of this (10):

- (10) F.: There are some shops that tend to have Italian names, on the other hand the restaurant, which is more attractive with a foreign name, has a foreign name. It depends on the use you want; if you go to a restaurant you expect to find a different culture.²⁰

18. Original: *Non mi è capitato di vedere nulla in spagnolo o in rumeno, forse perché [le lingue – ndr] non sono così dissimili dalla nostra lingua; forse [i parlanti – ndr] preferiscono imparare l'italiano e usare quello, anche se a Firenze c'è una comunità peruviana abbastanza forte, credo.*

19. Original: *Quindi, se i cartelli sono spesso in altre lingue, è perché gli stranieri più anziani non si sono integrati.*

20. Original: *Ci sono alcuni negozi che tendono ad avere nomi italiani, mentre il ristorante, che è più attraente con un nome straniero, ha un nome straniero. Dipende dall'uso che se ne vuole fare; se si va al ristorante ci si aspetta di trovare una cultura diversa.*



Figure 4. Arabic and Chinese in the LL. Pictures: Carla Bagna, Martina Bellinzona and Viola Monaci.

Languages are used for their aesthetic qualities, communicating with a presumably cosmopolitan, open-to-the-world and sophisticated clientele (Heller 2003). Therefore, it is not so much a question of conveying real meanings, it is rather to 'acquire cultural capital by utilising the symbolic economy' (Leeman & Modan 2010: 354).

With reference to the data reported in Table 4, it seems that among the most visible languages are German, Spanish, French and Russian. Each of them has heterogeneous functions, depending on the neighbourhood: for example, French is mainly used in Oltrarno in the names of businesses, which exploit its symbolic and evocative power linked to fashion and elegance. However, in the Station area (which is most affected by this and the other languages), it mainly fulfils the role of linguistic facilitator for tourists. The signs conceived for a foreign public on vacation are the most diverse from a linguistic perspective: of the 80 units of analysis considered here, 10 are monolingual, 39 bilingual (usually with Italian or English) and 31 are multilingual. Almost all of the 31 multilingual occurrences are single messages aimed at tourists, such as menus, or regulatory texts connected to COVID-19.

Finally, the Oltrarno and Station areas are particularly interesting given the presence of dialects and vernaculars. In Italy, this is a rather recent phenomenon that is common to all large Italian cities (Bernini, Guerini & Iannaccaro 2021).²¹ It could be interpreted in light of the change in attitudes towards dialects, which were stigmatised as a sign of ignorance until a few years ago: nowadays they are generally appreciated and associated with positive values.

It has been observed that dialects are used above all in commercial communication linked to catering, the aim being to create a homely atmosphere, to evoke ancient practices and traditions and to represent genuine and local food. Therefore, it is the dialect that becomes the bearer of connotative values linked to the local identity rather than the semantic content of the terms. An example of this is photo 1 in Figure 5 (Station area), related to the sign of a tavern called 'i' Vinaino' (the little vintner): the linguistic typicality, realised in a shared Florentine cliché through *i*, for the singular masculine determinative article *il* in front of a consonant, to convey the typicality and genuineness of the proposed food.

A similar occurrence is shown in photo 2 in Figure 5 (observed in Le Cure). In this case, the type of business is rendered in Italian (*pescheria* – fish market) but the dialectal rendering is both in the name (*i' cavalluccio viola* – the purple horse) and the pun on the right, 'Crudo o cotto – *bono tutto*' (raw or cooked, everything is good). In these cases, too, the use of well-known expressions appears to serve the objective of involving the expected public in an intimate, community dimension in the sharing of local gastronomic dishes.

Photo 3 in Figure 5 (San Lorenzo), in turn, gives an example of a regional term that is commonly used in Florence and other Tuscan cities. We refer to the word 'mescita', which means the sale and distribution of wine in glasses for consumption.

The last two cases we consider worthy of note, illustrated in photos 4 and 5 (Figure 5 – both in the Station area), also have dialectal uses with different functions. In both cases they are signs with a regulatory function: the first is placed outside

21. It is important to specify that this is not a phenomenon isolated to the Italian context: studies on the commodification of local varieties and dialects, and their presence in the LL, have been conducted in various contexts, European and otherwise (see, for example, Strand 2015).



Figure 5. Dialect in the Florentine LL. Pictures: Carla Bagna, Martina Bellinzona and Viola Monaci.

a pub frequented by young people and aimed at raising awareness of the potential disturbance nightlife causes in the neighbourhood; the second is placed on the window of a restaurant, aimed at regulating entrances to prevent COVID-19 infections. The choice of dialect here is intended to soften the intensity of the imperative, and to convey confidence, ideally to bring the user of the sign closer to its creator.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter explored the LL of some districts of Florence, focusing on manifestations of the different poles of the linguistic space (De Mauro 1980), and comparing the visual data with the perceptions of citizens. From a linguistic and semiotic perspective, traits common to the different mapped districts were observed: over the years, touristification (Gant 2015) has served to promote the English language (Barni & Bagna 2010). Our qualitative analysis showed how the language is used primarily to facilitate tourist-related commercial purposes, given its role as a lingua franca. At the same time, however, it also and above all appears as a device to activate values that convey an aura of prestige, implying that the shop, for example, is part of the international scene as 'a device to establish a trendy cosmopolitan image to native Italian speakers' (Griffin 2004: 7). However, the inhabitants involved in the focus groups perceived this data differently. The lack of correspondence between the visibility of languages and the awareness of citizens is of note and is one of the most

significant findings of this study. This must also be taken into consideration for future studies, which must necessarily have an all-encompassing vision of spaces and people (Peck, Stroud & Williams 2018) and their interaction.

As far as other languages are concerned, the visibility of immigrant languages and those that function to facilitate international communication has been documented as poor, attributable only in part to the interruption in tourist flows due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, it seems that languages other than English and Italian are used mainly to offer experiences: their presence in the LL should therefore not be interpreted as enhancing linguistic diversity or as having ethnic connotations, but rather as having identity connotations (Ferrini 2016). In other words, the use of Chinese, Japanese, French or Spanish does not serve an internal function in a community, it is rather intended to attract the attention of the Italian (or 'Western') population by evoking certain semiotic values. Only Arabic in our corpus has an informative function, albeit limited to certain contexts and certain neighbourhoods.

The above leads us to different conclusions. On the level of linguistic use, the different neighbourhoods have their own characteristics that reflect the functions for which they are responsible (e.g. commercial, residential) and, at least in part, the presence of individuals with different linguistic repertoires. Although not all languages spoken by immigrants find space in the LL, there is no doubt that the areas most affected by the presence of different ethnolinguistic communities are also those in which the LL is more likely to be multilingual.

More than linguistic differences, however, what emerged clearly from the analysis is a semiotic heterogeneity between neighbourhoods: different signs, produced by different actors, combine to make the identity of the neighbourhoods clear, reflecting and emphasising it at the same time. In short, the semiotic urban space serves and reflects the identity and atmosphere of the district (see also Chapter 4 in this volume). Citizens themselves are partly aware of these differences and, if opportunely stimulated and enabled to dialogue with each other, appear to be attentive to the functional differences between neighbourhoods, and also reflective on the visibility of languages in the LL.

The analysis, as anticipated, also revealed a limited degree of awareness of effective urban multilingualism, with informants convinced of the total absence of languages other than Italian in the LL or, *vice versa*, of the predominance in certain areas of the city of other languages (Arabic and Chinese above all). This could be interpreted in two different, but complementary ways. On the one hand, overexposure to English, a language perceived as close to a lingua franca and learned at school, goes unnoticed, blending into a LL so familiar as to be invisible. Facilitation for tourists, which Florentines do not need, and English shop signs are not processed on a cognitive level, and thus become imperceptible. On the other hand, awareness of the presence of different ethnolinguistic communities on the territory, added to the lack of familiarity with graphic systems distant from the Italian one, lead to the emergence of linguistic stereotypes. In other words, it is sufficient to know that people of another nationality live in an area, or to see a sign in Arabic, for people to believe that the entire LL is 'invaded' by other languages (Minuz & Forconi 2018).

The above perceptions do not differ from what was detected during the pre-pandemic period in various Italian cities, and for this reason what emerged in this

data requires reflection that must not be restricted to researchers and linguists, but must also involve the entire educational system, including language teaching and citizenship education. Nowadays more than ever, activities that involve LL observation and analysis facilitate the realisation of this task.

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