

ON THE LANGUAGE SITUATION OF TARACLIA (MOLDOVA) THROUGH THE PRISM OF LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE¹⁵

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Abstract: This paper discusses the language situation in the town of Taraclia in Southern Moldova, where ethnic Bulgarians are a majority. The aim of this study was to reveal the characteristics of language use and choice in the linguistic landscape (LL) of the town. The data obtained from the author's fieldwork in the town in 2019 will be analyzed within the framework of sociolinguistics studies of LL. The analysis of the patterns of language use on signs has revealed that Russian maintains the function of conveying information, which indicates its important role as the local lingual franca, while Bulgarian fulfills a symbolic function in the LL of Taraclia, despite the fact that it is the mother tongue of the town's majority.

Keywords: Language Situation, Linguistic Landscape, Bessarabian Bulgarians, Taraclia, Russian.

1. Introductory Remarks

It is well known that Taraclia District (Raionul Taraclia) is inhabited by a large number of ethnic Bulgarians as a result of the migration process that began in the 19th century. The administrative center of the district is the town of Taraclia known as the center of Bulgarians of Moldova, where ethnic Bulgarians constitute the majority of the town's population. Despite this favorable demographic condition, it has been reported that the Russian language is widely used in communication, rather than Bulgarian (Nedelčev 1996, 1998, Hatlaš 2013, etc.). This study aimed to shed light on the language situation of Taraclia by discussing the patterns of language use in the multilingual community through the prism of linguistic landscape (LL). The main data used for the analysis of LL consisted of photographs taken by the author during his field re-

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search in Taraclia in the summer of 2019, with some additional items provided later by Prof. V. Kondov (Taraclia State University). The photographs contain monolingual and/or bi-/multilingual signs, and they are analyzed in terms of the appearance of the languages used on the signs, the font size, and the order of each language.

Section 2 provides background information on the language situation in Taraclia. Section 3 briefly explains the methodological framework of analysis in terms of LL. Finally, Section 4 analyzes the data of the LL and summarizes the findings of the analysis. Section 5 provides the concluding remarks.

2. Language situation in Taraclia – Background Information

The first migration of Bulgarians to Taraclia was in 1813 (Nedelčev 1996: 6). Since then, the Bulgarian language has been used there for more than 200 years. Even today, ethnic Bulgarians constitute the majority of the town's population. According to the latest national census of the Republic of Moldova conducted in 2014 (Recensământul 2014), the predominant ethnic group is Bulgarian that constitute 77.4% of the total population, that is, 9,560 out of a total of 12,355. The other ethnicities that constitute the population of Taraclia are Moldovan (6.4%), Gagauz (5.9%), Russian (5%), Ukrainian (3%), others (1.3%), and not indicated (1%) (cf. Figure 1).

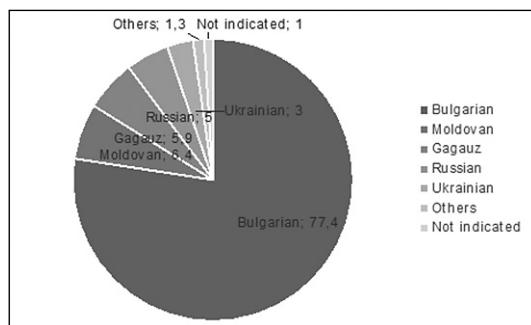


Figure 1: The Population of the Town of Taraclia (%) (Recensământul 2014)

The language situation in Taraclia at the end of the 20th century is well described in Nedelčev's monographs (Nedelčev 1996, 1998). Nedelčev (1998: 7) points out that the ethnic Bulgarians in Taraclia are bilingual with Russian, and the younger generation tends to use Russian more frequently. Another important fact he notices is the different purposes of each language, that is, “Bulgarian is [used] most frequently in daily life and Russian in official communication” (Nedelčev 1998: 10, cf. also Nedelčev 1996: 18, Hatlas 2013: 116). Hatlas (2013), who vis-

ited the town in 2010, also confirms the widespread use of Russian. He reports that in 2010, “a significant part of the inhabitants of Taraclia understand the native language of their ancestors and can fluently speak this language (of course in the local form), although they would rather use Russian in public spaces” (Hatlas 2013: 117fn). Thus, it is suggested that the language situation in Taraclia can be characterized as diglossic (cf. Nedelčev 1996: 12). However, whether the diglossic situation is and will be preserved remains a question. According to Nedelčev (1996: 17), in 1996, those of the age between 20–40 years predominantly used Russian in various domains of communication, while the elderly over the age of 60 years used Bulgarian (cf. also Hatlas 2013: 116). It is noteworthy that Russian has almost replaced Bulgarian even in unofficial settings (Nedelčev 1996: 14). Furthermore, the young generation is not “young” anymore today and those who predominantly used Russian in those days are now over 40 years old, which suggests that Russian is much more widespread in the town today, having extended its domains of use among the local ethnic Bulgarians.

The national census provides information regarding the mother tongue and the language used in daily life (Recensământul 2014). Among the 9,560 ethnic Bulgarians, the number of those who consider Bulgarian as their mother tongue reached 9,080 (95%), while that of those who consider Russian was 373 (3.9%). Further, 5,342 (55.9%) used Bulgarian in daily life, while 3,925 (41.1%) used Russian. It is significant that the number of those who spoke Russian in daily communication reached nearly the half of those who consider Bulgarian as their mother tongue. In general, the number of those who used Russian in daily life in Taraclia, regardless of ethnicity, reached 6,073, while 5,594 used Bulgarian. The number of Russian speakers slightly exceeded that of Bulgarian speakers. In other words, half of the town’s population regularly used Russian in daily life. Although the official data of the national census may not necessarily present a 100% precise picture of the reality, it is more or less confirmed that Russian is used frequently in daily communication in Taraclia.

Although Russian is a more popular language to be used in official and partially in unofficial communication among Bulgarians in Taraclia, the Bulgarian language is well maintained throughout the generations, as noted by Hatlas (2013: 117fn). This is worthy of attention when compared to other regions where Bulgarians have migrated. For example, Brănești in the outskirts of Bucharest was dominated by Bulgarian migrants, but language contact with Romanian brought about many unfavorable social conditions for the preservation of the local Bulgarian language and culture. Resultantly, Romanian has almost completely replaced the local Bulgarian dialect (Sugai 2021). In Taraclia, several reasons contribute to language maintenance among the local Bulgari-

ans. For example, the education of / in Bulgarian has been conducted in schools (see also Dyer 2015: 116–119). Moreover, the author of this paper confirmed through interviews with the local teachers of Bulgarian that the education of / in Bulgarian has been recently introduced also in kindergartens. Higher education of / in Bulgarian is also offered in Taraclia State University established in 2004. Students may have opportunities to study in universities in Bulgaria with scholarships provided by the Bulgarian government. Moreover, the Consulate of the Republic of Bulgaria, opened in 2017, provides a good connection with Bulgaria. Consequently, the local Bulgarians in Taraclia maintain a relatively close connection with Bulgaria in many ways, especially after the independence of the Republic of Moldova. All these facts, including the demographic configuration, undoubtedly offer favorable conditions for preserving the Bulgarian language and culture in Taraclia. As stated earlier, however, the Bulgarian language is not used as much as expected in comparison to Russian, especially by the younger generation; Bulgarian has been almost replaced even in the unofficial domains. Therefore, this study aimed to deepen the understanding of today's language situation in Taraclia by analyzing the patterns of language choice and use in the LL. More specifically, further sections will examine if the language situation described in this section is also reflected in the LL.

3. Analysis in Terms of Linguistic Landscape

In this study, we understand linguistic landscape as defined in the fundamental work of Landry & Bourhis (1997: 25): “The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. The linguistic landscape of a territory can serve two basic functions: an informational function and a symbolic function.” The study of LL can contribute to the understanding of the functions and the relative status of a language in relation to the other language(s) used in the multilingual community through the analysis of “the *dominance* of one linguistic code over another on bilingual signs” (Malinowski 2009: 108). Dominance can be examined by determining which language occupies the most prominent position on the sign. Therefore, in this study, the concrete items will be analyzed, considering the following: a) the number of languages on the sign; b) the location and order of each language on the sign; and c) the font size used for each language (cf. Gorter 2006: 3, Cenoz & Gorter 2006: 71).

The category of the signs subject to analysis is also important. In the study of LL, the two categories are usually distinguished: governmental or official

top-down signs and private or individual *bottom-up* signs (cf. Landry & Bourhis 1997: 26–27, Malinowski 2009: 108, etc.). The *top-down* signs include official signs established by the government and other official institutions such as street names or names of government buildings, while the *bottom-up* signs refer to non-official signs established by commercial or private organizations such as advertising signs in shops or outside on the streets. The distinction between the top-down and bottom-up signs is important because the language that takes a dominant position on signs often varies depending on the category of signs (Malinowski 2009: 109). Therefore, it is expected to reveal the relative status and power, and the function of the languages involved in LL, which consequently contributes to the understanding of the overall picture of the language situation in Taraclia.

4. Linguistic Landscape in Taraclia

4.1. Data

The main data for analysis in this study are photographs of various signs taken by the author in the town of Taraclia in August 2019, but some additional items, mainly from Supermarket “Linnela” were provided by Prof. V. Kondov (Taraclia State University) in October 2021 upon the author’s request.

4.2. Analysis

In general, signs in Bulgarian are rarely found in Taraclia (cf. Palágyi 2017a: 5fn). Instead, both Romanian and Russian are equally predominant in the LL of Taraclia. In governmental and official buildings, the informational plate, on which the name and working hours are written, is most frequently displayed in these two languages. In most cases, both languages are equally accessible in terms of visual performance. For example, in the case of District Council (Районный совет), the name is written in Romanian on the left and Russian on the right, using the same font and size (cf. Figure 2). The same can be said about the top-down sign of District Public Library (Районная публичная библиотека). Another example of the top-down bilingual signs in Romanian and Russian that attracts attention is that of the Civil Registry Office of the Ministry of Justice. The institution’s name is written on two separate plates in each language. The plate on the top is written in Romanian, while that on the bottom is written in Russian. The relative locations of each language are fixed on top-down signs, and they hardly appear in reverse order. This suggests the relative power of Romanian in the sphere of top-down signs found in governmental institutions. Scollon & Scollon (2003: 120) note that “the preferred

code is on top, on the left, or in the center and the marginalized code is on the bottom, on the right, or on the margins.” The preferred code in the case of top-down signs in Taraclia is Romanian because it is the national language of the Republic of Moldova. The prominent appearance of Romanian on top-down signs is definitely motivated by this fact.

Nevertheless, it can be asserted that the language that mainly fulfils an informational function in the LL of Taraclia is Russian rather than Romanian. This is suggested by the fact that monolingual signs in Russian can be found in many places. One such example is found at the entrance of the town hall of Taraclia. The name of “The Center for Information and Service Provision (Центр информирования и предоставления услуг)” is written only in Russian. The choice of language to convey this information should have been motivated by the assumption that all citizens of Taraclia know Russian at least to a certain degree. Otherwise, it would cause an unfavorable and inconvenient condition for the inhabitants who do not know Russian. Another example that indicates that Russian fulfils the informational function is the top-down prohibition signs found in many places of the town. For example, the sign found at the entrance of a public building prohibits smoking inside. Since it does not contain an illustration regarding the content of the sign, the information is transmitted only by the language itself. Another sign found on a fence that surrounds a pond in a park prohibits bathing in the pond (cf. Figure 3). The fact that the only language used on these signs is Russian clearly indicates that Russian is more likely to be understood and, thus, is effective in conveying important messages to the citizens. The language choice in these top-down signs suggests the predominance of Russian in everyday communication of the citizens of Taraclia, which confirms the reports about the patterns of language use in Taraclia made in some previous studies (Nedelčev 1996, 1998, Hatlaš 2013, etc.). Moreover, it is also reflected to some extent in the data of the national census quoted in Section 2.

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As for signs in Bulgarian, they are usually found in places related to the Bulgarian culture. Palágyi (2017a: 5fn) reports that signs in Bulgarian are restricted to a few cases, but there are actually more Bulgarian signs than expected, although they are less prominent than Russian and Romanian in general. First, the monument dedicated to the local volunteers who participated in the Liberation War of Bulgaria between 1877–1878, which was one of the Bulgarian signs reported by Palágyi (2017a: 5fn), is a good example of Bulgarian signs that can be found in connection with the Bulgarian cultural and historical heritage. However, it should be pointed out that the words quoted from the local hero Olimpij Panov are written in Russian, and not Bulgarian. It can be

compared to a new monument dedicated to the Bulgarian national hero Vasil Levski raised in 2018, in which his words are inscribed in Bulgarian.

Another sign that deserves attention is the plate embedded to the landmark of the town, “the fountain of Hadžidimkov (Хаджидимковата чешма),” which was constructed in 1892 (Nedelčev 1998: 34, Červenkov & Duminica 2013: 181). The text on the plate is written in Modern Bulgarian, using characters that are not in use in today’s literary language. The content of the text roughly includes the construction date of the fountain, the message that everyone can drink cold water to refresh themselves, and the names of people who contributed to the construction of the fountain. It can be argued that the existence of the Bulgarian text together with this old fountain plays an important role in connecting the local Bulgarian inhabitants with their ancestor’s historical and cultural heritage, which in turn contributes to the formation and strengthening of the (Bessarabian) Bulgarian identity. This idea is supported by the fact that “the fountain of Hadžidimkov is traditionally recognized as an ‘emblem’ of the settlement and is used on labels of manufactured goods of Taraclia in a simplified fashion” (Nedelčev 1998: 35).

One of the most unique and significant places related to the Bulgarian culture in Taraclia is the theater “Funny Friday” (Театър “Смешен петък”). The theater has been playing an important role in preserving and developing the Bulgarian culture in the town since its foundation in 1981. The name of the theater is written on the entrance wall in Bulgarian on the left (TEATЪР “СМЕШЕН ПЕТЪК”) and in Romanian on the right (TEATRUL “SMESEN PETÂK”) (cf. Figure 4). This suggests the relative importance of Bulgarian. Moreover, the plates embedded on the wall display the names of the theater and the community center of Bulgarian culture (Народно читалище) only in Bulgarian, along with some other information of them. In this case, Bulgarian undoubtedly has an informational function. However, the choice of Bulgarian as the sole language on the signs is also connected to its symbolic function. It is interesting to note that there is a sign that displays the following message inside: “Bulgarian is spoken here (Тук се говори на български).” This message in Bulgarian clearly indicates that Russian is the frequently used language even for the local Bulgarians. Otherwise, this sign would never be established in such a center of the Bulgarian culture in Taraclia.

The Museum of Cultural Heritage of Taraclia is where Bulgarian traditional items of the settlement are exhibited. At the entrance of the museum, there is a plate in honor of the local history researcher Petăr Kajr’ak which is written in Bulgarian. However, unlike the abovementioned theater, Russian is predominantly used in descriptions on the walls and on the exhibited items. Some of the Bulgarian traditional items displayed in the museum have bilingual signs, but

Russian comes first on the left or top, while Bulgarian is written on the right or bottom: *тарелка деревянная – паница дървена, стул – стол*, etc. Since the museum is not exclusively for the local Bulgarians, it is natural that Russian is predominant in the descriptions.

The first sign that you see when you enter the town of Taraclia is the gateway sign (cf. Figure 3). It has the name of the town “TARACLIA” in Romanian, and under the name there is a brief explanation of the town written in Russian: “The center of Bulgarians of Moldova (Центр болгар Молдовы).” The reason why Russian is used here instead of Bulgarian and/or Romanian can be explained by the function of Russian in the multilingual state, namely its position as a lingua franca among different ethnic groups. Soon after the gateway sign, there appears another welcome sign (cf. Figure 5) in which, along with the year of establishment of the town — 1813, “welcome” is written in three languages in the following order from the top to the bottom: Romanian (Bine ați venit!), Russian (Добро пожаловать!), and Bulgarian (Добре дошли!). The function of the message in Bulgarian is considered symbolic, but it also plays a role in providing visitors with the information that Bulgarian is spoken in Taraclia in addition to Romanian and Russian. This way, it also partially fulfills an informational function (cf. Landry & Bourhis 1997: 25). The same can be said about an object located in the center of Taraclia that reads “Taraclia loves you (Тараклия те обича)” in Bulgarian. This object does not carry any specific informational content, but only a symbolic connotation that “reminds” the town’s inhabitants of the fact that it is the “center of Bulgarians of Moldova”. However, the road sign that stands next to the welcome sign is monolingual in Romanian, probably due to its strict official nature, unlike the symbolic welcome sign that is less official.

Another trilingual sign can be found at the entrance of the town hall of Taraclia. On the wall, there is a trilingual plate, in which the name of the institution is written in three languages from top to bottom in the following order: Romanian (PRIMARIA о. TARACLIA), Russian (ПРИМЭРИЯ г. ТАРАКЛИЯ), and Bulgarian (КМЕТСТВО г. ТАРАКЛИЯ) (cf. Figure 5). It comes as a surprise that Bulgarian is visible in such a typical top-down sign, although in the least prominent position. Further, it is interesting to note that the Russian abbreviation of “town” — г. — is used instead of гр., which is the norm of standard Bulgarian. It must be the influence of the custom of Russian orthography, which suggests that the Russian sign should have functioned as the basis of the Bulgarian one, and not vice versa.

Therefore, although signs in Bulgarian are not as prominent as those in Russian and/or Romanian, they certainly constitute a part of the LL of Taraclia. The function that the Bulgarian signs fulfil is symbolic, especially when Russian and/or Romanian are/is written together with Bulgarian.

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The signs found at the Taraclia State University and its related facilities seem to be predominantly in Bulgarian. It must be motivated by the aim of the university “to promote the development of the Bulgarian diaspora, the preservation of mother tongue (i.e., Bulgarian [note by the author]), history and tradition of the Bulgarian people.” The name of the institution and the university’s dormitory can be found on plates in both Romanian and Bulgarian. Interestingly, there are variations in the relative location of the two languages on the official signs. On the one hand, the name in Romanian is on the left or top, while that in Bulgarian is on the right or bottom. On the other hand, however, there are also signs that are in reverse order. This suggests that the two languages are treated equally on the top-down signs in the university area. In any case, it is surprising that Russian is generally excluded on the top-down signs in the university, with Bulgarian seemingly playing the role that Russian does in other official buildings. As a whole, it seems that Bulgarian is prominent in the university building, as monolingual signs in Bulgarian can be found, for example, in the ethnographic museum and the university history museum. In these cases, Bulgarian signs are considered to have not only a symbolic function, but also an informational function.

Further, the signs at the entrance of the university’s dormitory are also noteworthy. Among the top-down signs, namely the plates with the names of the dormitory and university, there is a bottom-up sign written only in Russian. It is an advertising poster for a barbershop pasted on the left side of the top-down Romanian sign. “Barbershop (парикмахерская)” and the working hours, days, and telephone number for contact are written in Russian. This must be a reflection of the author’s wish to reach as many potential customers as possible via Russian, regardless of their mother tongue (cf. Muth 2012: 216). This, in turn, indicates that Russian is a powerful device for interethnic communication. Thus, it is not surprising that such bottom-up signs are preferred to be encoded only in Russian.

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Finally, from the group of bottom-up signs, the signs that have purely commercial purposes will be analyzed. In Taraclia, as Palágyi (2017a: 6) points out, information on the descriptions in commercial places had been given only in Russian until the opening of supermarket “Linnela” in 2017. In this supermarket located in the center of the town, there are many Bulgarian signs inside (see also Srebranov 2016: 108).

First, certain grocery categories, such as bread, vegetables, cheese, and meat, are written on panels located above the display shelves. They are writ-

ten in Romanian on the top and in Bulgarian on the bottom (e.g., CARNE – MECO). The types of fonts used in each language differ, but their font sizes are the same. Considering “Linnela” being a Moldovan supermarket chain, it is not surprising that Romanian occupies a more prominent position on each sign. What deserves attention is that Russian is excluded from the signs. The bilingual signs in Romanian and Bulgarian can be found in other places inside the supermarket as well. On these signs, Romanian has a more prominent position, being located on the top, using handwriting style letters and bigger font size. This must be a reflection of the relative importance of Romanian against Bulgarian. All the signs that include Bulgarian seem to have been established for permanent use and are not intended to be removed, unlike the advertisement posters or descriptions that are displayed only temporarily for a certain period of time.

Price tags are another example of bilingual signs, in which Romanian is located on the top. What is significant here is that it is in combination with Russian rather than Bulgarian, with Russian being located under Romanian in a smaller font size. This means that Bulgarian cannot find its place in the price tags that are likely to be renewed and replaced constantly. On top of that, temporary descriptions such as “We do not serve you without masks (Без маски не обслуживаем)” in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic are monolingual in Russian. Considering the patterns of language use on signs, it is suggested that Russian maintains the important function of conveying information, while Bulgarian has a symbolic function.

To sum up thus far, it is noteworthy that there are descriptions in Bulgarian in such typical commercial places. It is possible to assume that the reason why Bulgarian can be found even in these bottom-up signs in the supermarket is related to the fact that the owner of the supermarket considered it effective to appeal to the local Bulgarians that constitute the majority in the town. It is significant to note, however, that even in this case, Russian seems to play an important role in conveying information in the store.

4.3. Findings

The analysis of the LL of Taraclia has revealed the following: three languages (Romanian, Russian, and Bulgarian) are used in the LL of Taraclia, but which languages are chosen and how they are displayed in the bi- / trilingual signs vary to a considerable degree. As for the top-down signs, the national language Romanian generally occupies the most prominent position. Russian is written together with Romanian in most cases. However, the top-down signs in Bulgarian are found more rarely. They can be found mainly in Taraclia State University, although the signs are bilingual with Romanian in most cases.

When Bulgarian is found on a trilingual sign as in the case of the town hall, it is always located in the least prominent place on the sign. Overall, the presence of Bulgarian is not as apparent as expected from the demographic data. As for the bottom-up signs, signs in Bulgarian are most likely to be found in places that are related to the Bulgarian cultural heritage. The supermarket “Linella” is one of the rare cases where bottom-up signs that include Bulgarian can be observed. Otherwise, Russian and Romanian are predominant on the bottom-up signs.

5. Concluding Remarks

Consequently, it can be asserted that Romanian and Russian are the most widely used codes on top-down signs, but in general, the Russian signs seem to be more visible in the LL of Taraclia, which is confirmed by the fact that the Russian monolingual signs are relatively often observed, thus fulfilling the informational function. The constant presence of Russian suggests the firmly fixed status of Russian as the local lingua franca (cf. Muth 2012: 222). In contrast, the Bulgarian signs are rarely monolingual except for a few cases. This suggests that they have a symbolic function. Thus, it is argued that the tendency to constantly use Russian for conveying information in daily communication is confirmed through the analysis of LL, although it should be examined more comprehensively by the quantitative analysis of LL in the future.

Nevertheless, it is significant that Bulgarian can find its place in the LL of Taraclia. The existence of descriptions in Bulgarian demonstrates visually that the ethnic group of Bulgarians and their culture are present in the territory. Moreover, since it is the written information that people see in daily life, “[t]he linguistic landscape or parts of the linguistic landscape can have an influence on language use” (Cenoz & Gorter 2006: 68). Therefore, it is suggested that making Bulgarian even more visible on both public and private signs in Taraclia would have the function to not only let others recognize on a daily basis that Bulgarians are part of the population, but also, more importantly, promote the local Bulgarians to use Bulgarian more often by strengthening their ethnic identity as Bulgarians in the multilingual community. Thus, the increase of signs in Bulgarian should have an important meaning in preserving and developing the Bulgarian language and culture in Taraclia (cf. also Srebranov 2016: 108–109). I intend to examine this issue in future studies.

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Appendix (Author's personal archive):



Figure 2: Romanian-Russian text



Figure 3: Monolingual Russian text



Figure 4: Bulgarian-Romanian text



Figure 5: Romanian-Russian-Bulgarian Trilingual text

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