

## Minorityhood in Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare. Status Report on the Linguistic Landscape in a Border Town

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*The analysis of the Linguistic Landscape (LL) that has become a separate field of research focuses more and more on the living language and the relative real image created by the visual elements thereof in addition to the theoretical rationale and findings. With the examples found in Szatmárnémeti (Satu Mare) in the Partium region, this study is aimed at finding an answer to the manner in which the local and national public services approach the minority language users in a real, every day environment and to what extent they can be addressed in their native language. The multilingual inscriptions in public places are the indicators of the political, economic and social relations in a community as they are characterised by constant changes since they do not exist on their own but rather through their environment, politics and community. This makes the LL energetic, dynamic and plastic, being connected to the current political, social and economic networks by several connection points.*

The analysis of the linguistic landscape, which has become a separate field of research due to the analysis of visual language use, has also become more frequent and popular in the past decades. In spite of the theoretical rational, living language and the visual elements thereof, these are still the ones that depict a real image about the way in which a given community, society, people or nation relates to and approaches the language use of a given place, region or country. International specialists interpret the concept of the linguistic landscape broadly, emphasising the various visual language use manners in their analyses and focus on the manner in which “the different minority languages are manifest and interpreted in the visually describable multilingual sociolinguistic reality.”<sup>1</sup>

Petteri Laihonen introduces the concept in his study on *Csíkszentdomokos* in *Szeklerland* (Romania) in the following way: “originally the linguistic landscape meant »the official road signs, billboards, street names, names of

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1 Theory and Practice of Linguistic Landscape Research on East-Central European Minorities (2013). Available: [www.nytud.hu/nyelvitajkep](http://www.nytud.hu/nyelvitajkep) (Downloaded: 05.03.2018.)

places, commercial names and the official plates of public institutions«<sup>2</sup> in a given area, region or urban agglomeration...»<sup>3</sup>

We can pin down two important concepts in case of inscriptions based on the very first researches in the field, namely the communicative and the symbolic meaning.<sup>4</sup> The former has been the governing form for centuries. In this specific case, in Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare, the most widely used language at the beginning was Latin but quite early Hungarian inscriptions were found for instance in churches. Due to various historical influences the relationship between the communicative and the symbolic meaning changed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the former got pushed into the background while the symbolic meaning became more important. The triumph of national languages spread as a wildfire throughout European society under the influence of the ideology governing nation-states, which consequently lead to the slow disappearance of the Latin inscriptions on the one hand and the official, as well as the commercial inscriptions started being written in the national language on the other hand. “As soon as the elements of the linguistic landscape appeared in minority languages too, the language, which was in a weaker position of power, began to be stigmatised by being positioned peripherally, for example in a smaller size, in another colour, on the right hand side or under the inscription in the official state language. In general, only private inscriptions are tolerated to appear autonomously i.e. that the text is written only in a minority language.”<sup>5</sup> The analysis of the linguistic landscape of a certain settlement strengthens and encourages the inhabitants’ language awareness and need to use their respective native language, stimulating its visual use, strengthening moreover the need for the verbal use of the given language. In case of minority language use we also need to pay attention to the extent in which a certain community exercises its right to language use and if there are any intentions aimed at altering the linguistic landscape, their kind if any and whether they are coherent: we shall not think only about public administration or companies. It could also be important what common people write on their gates (such as “Beware of the dog”).

*Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare* is a country town of significant historical importance. Anonymus mentions it in his *Gesta Hungarorum* under the name of *Castrum Zotmar* and as an important commercial hub as well as an important salt supplying and shipping centre on the river. At the beginning of the 1700s Swabians were colonised in the area and the number of Jewish inhabitants constantly increased. In the mid-1940s, 25% of the inhabitants declared themselves Jews. Based on the last official census carried out in 2011, the ethnic composition of the inhabitants is presented in the figure below (Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, we shall not forget the significant fact

2 LANDRY, Rodrigue – BOURHIS, Richard (1997): Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality. *Journal of Language and Psychology*, Vol. 16, No. 1. 25. As cited by Laihonon.

3 LAIHONEN, Petteri (2013): Csíkszentdomokosi nyelvi tájkép. *Székelyföld*, Vol. 17, No. 7. 157–177.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 See more on [www.satumare.insse.ro](http://www.satumare.insse.ro).

that although the Swabian and Jewish population is relatively smaller in number and the former partly uses Hungarian while the latter uses the Hungarian language in a much wider degree, they still have a strong cultural and national influence on the everyday life of the town either in the administration or in the economy or education.

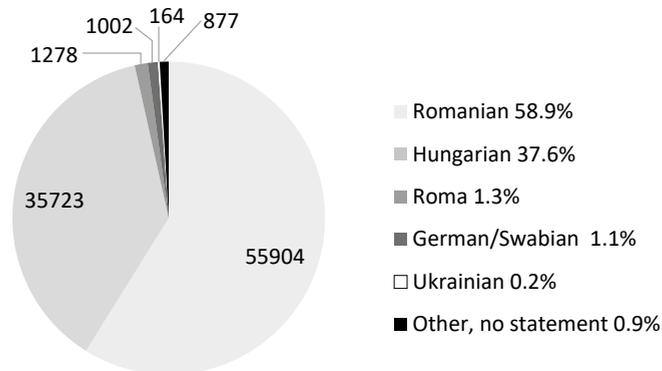


Figure 1: The ethnic composition of the inhabitants of Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare in the light of the 2011 official census (Source: [www.satumare.insse.ro](http://www.satumare.insse.ro))

After the deportation of the Jews, the ethnic composition of the town started changing slowly but uninterruptedly and it continued under the Ceaușescu regime as the number of Romanians constantly increased since many inhabitants decided to relocate either officially or unofficially. This process became even stronger after the regime change of 1989. In the immediately following period, the biggest number of inhabitants was registered in the 1992 census, namely 131,987 when the situation skewed in favour of the Romanian inhabitants in a 51–48% ratio. The overall population has decreased constantly since then, the ethnic composition favours the Romanians as those of Hungarian nationality move to Hungary in large numbers (by guess 6%<sup>7</sup> of the town's population resides in Hungary being registered as working in Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare).

### The Linguistic Landscape of Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare in the Light of the Public Institutions

Before starting to analyse the visual material<sup>8</sup> we will have to pin down that there are important ongoing changes, as there were great battles in terms of minority language use in Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare. In the last elections, the coalition between the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR) and the German

7 Ibid.

8 All photos used in this article were taken by the author.

Democratic Forum won the majority of the votes both in the county and the city council, the current President of the former being Pataki Csaba, while the mayor of the town is Kereskényi Gábor winning their respective mandates supported by the DAHR. Kereskényi Gábor replaced the former nationalist mayor, Dorel Coica inheriting many minority language use-related law suits from him. We have to note that according to the law in force, the number of Hungarian-speaking inhabitants exceeds the legal threshold by far, and this is why the use of Hungarian as a minority language is guaranteed by international regulations and is not negotiable. In the light of all that, it would be worth repeating this analysis in one or two years comparing the data as the leaders of the new public administration have already introduced many new regulations and amendments.

We have mentioned in the introduction that inscriptions have two basic functions:<sup>9</sup> a communicative function aimed primarily at conveying the information and a symbolic function that provides attributes to the space. The analysis below carried out based on the photos taken in *Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare* and analysed according to the following categories shall focus on this aspect, too.

The linguistic landscape of the public and municipally supported institutions:

The number of Hungarian-speaking inhabitants in *Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare* decreases proportionally as the number of Romanians increases. Politically, it is a much more disciplined and solidary community, and due to this fact, either the County Council President or the Mayor, or incidentally both are Hungarian. This is such an empowering possibility, which guarantees the protection of the Hungarians' rights. This process started under the mandate held by mayor Gyula Illyés and continued in 2016, after four years. As a result, over the last period the bi- or incidentally the tri-lingual inscriptions are well visible on the façades of the buildings hosting public institutions, which signifies that *Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare* is the common home to three nationalities.



Picture 1: Prefecture  
(Source: Made by the author.)

9 LAIHONEN (2013): *op. cit.*



*Picture 2: Agricultural Agency  
(Source: Made by the author.)*

The plates on the façades of the public institutions are generally blue and the inscriptions are white or yellow. They depict a rather uncreative, standard picture: on top the national flag is visible with the name of the institution. Considering the spatial relationship between the inscriptions, the first picture, as well as the plate on the façade of the town hall does not show any variances either in style or the font size of the text written in the different languages, so we cannot speak about any dominant position of any preferred language. The situation is similar in the second picture in which German appears as the second minority language. Here we cannot speak about discrimination or any emphasis whatsoever as the plate depicts a unitary aesthetic image, the vertical positioning being due to the architectural design of the building. The same unitary picture can be seen in case of the plate on the civil registry office or the building of the bilingual theatre supported by the local government in which both the Romanian and the Hungarian companies are equal parties working together in partnership.



*Picture 3: Civil Registry Office  
(Source: Made by the author.)*



*Picture 4: North Theatre  
(Source: Made by the author.)*

The case of the Szatmár County Museum (Picture 5) is ambivalent: there is no plate on the building, the name of the institution appears shortly, in one word on the façade: “Museum” in Romanian.



*Picture 5: Szatmár County Museum  
(Source: Made by the author.)*



*Picture 6: Museum logo  
(Source: Made by the author.)*

But the logo of the institution (Picture 6) is trilingual while the inscriptions inside the building are bilingual (Romanian and Hungarian). We have to note that the inscriptions welcoming the tourists in the Károlyi Castle are trilingual and bilingual in case of Ady Endre's birthplace both being subordinated to the County Museum.

Together with the analysis of the positive elements of the linguistic landscape it is also important to mention the missing elements, too. There are some public institutions, mostly the local agencies of the state bodies under national, central subordination, such as the Police, the Tax Office, the Court, the Prison or the Department for Pensions, where the inscriptions are only in Romanian, the minority language being completely omitted (see Pictures 7 and 8). This ideology is strengthened by the fact that there is only one official language, namely Romanian, in the eyes of the central authorities, and what is more, Bucharest does not consider the observance of the minority language regulations as being important, nor does it deem relevant, not even gesture-wise to ensure the possibilities for language use in a settlement with a Hungarian majority. The same omissions can be seen in case of EU-financed projects in which the data regarding the given investment are put down only in Romanian.



*Picture 7: County Police  
(Source: Made by the author.)*



*Picture 8: Cadastral Office  
(Source: Made by the author.)*

Street and square names can also be interpreted as a sharp attribute. The bilingual names generally do not bother the people living together and it is important for the Hungarian community not to feel as foreigners in their own city. In case communities with different linguistic and cultural background coexist, the artificially supported frictions are quite frequent. This is why the linguistic inscriptions and the use of symbols is so important for the minorities as by that they can mark the given space as being their own, too. We encounter bilingual street name signs quite often in *Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare*. Downtown most of them have been bilingualised upon the instructions of the city council, while in the other parts of the city the new street name signs gradually replace the others being unfortunately subject to the pace set by the local budget. We need to mention at this point the trial that set the precedent in which Gábor Kereskényi, winning this mandate as Mayor supported by the Hungarian party won the trial as Mayor against the Civic Engagement Movement (CEMO) fighting for bilingual inscriptions. The situation is slightly nuanced as the proceedings had been brought by the nationalist Dorel Coica, and that is why this case<sup>10</sup> is not tackled by this article.



*Pictures 9–11: Bilingual street and square signs in Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare  
(Source: Made by the author.)*

The situation is similar in case of the biggest public park (Picture 12) of the town in which case the Romanian name completely differs from the old Hungarian name. This is a case of reverse attribute: since Kossuth's name has a historical significance only for the Hungarians, the Romanians felt that it was important to symbolically take possession of the park and for that reasons they borrowed a name from their own history of origins. As we can see both names are peacefully there, side by side on

<sup>10</sup> The CEMO (Civic Engagement Movement) initiated a legal action to have bilingual street signs all over in Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare in 2016 – this time Dorel Coica was the Mayor of the city. The procedure continued even after the new Hungarian Mayor and city council were elected since the new municipal government did not change its policy in this field perceived as an illegal practice by CEMO. See more on [www.maszol.ro/index.php/tarsadalom/88204-cemo-kereskenyi-tul-draganak-tartotta-a-kisebbségi-jogok-ervenyesiteset](http://www.maszol.ro/index.php/tarsadalom/88204-cemo-kereskenyi-tul-draganak-tartotta-a-kisebbségi-jogok-ervenyesiteset)

the same stone, written in the same font style and size. It is true that the name does not follow any historical chronology, the Romanian name preceding the Hungarian. But the inscriptions in the park are only monolingual (Picture 13).



*Picture 12: Kossuth Park  
(Source: Made by the author.)*



*Picture 13: Monolingual inscription in the Kossuth Park  
(Source: Made by the author.)*

### *The linguistic landscape of schools and educational establishments*

The constant analysis of educational establishments is very important as they play a significant role in language socialisation. “The texts, pictures and other cultural symbols affixed on the school façades and inner spaces [...] are tools by which school communities influence the choice of linguistic and cultural values and ideologies.”<sup>11</sup> In *Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare* there are three traditional Hungarian secondary schools, allocated downtown. The aspect of the school buildings offers a strong point to the visitors, and the façade elements are important indicators of the identity form and the spirituality governing them. Out of the three schools, only the “Kölcsey Ferenc” Secondary School is funded exclusively by the state and that is why the national flag and the European Union flag are both mandatorily flying on its façade (Pictures 14–15).



*Pictures 14–15: The inscriptions on the façade of the “Kölcsey Ferenc” Secondary School  
(Source: Made by the author.)*

As we can notice the plates on the façade are grouped by language, they are similar in style and visual elements and what is more they are identical with most of the plates affixed on the public buildings. However, the Hungarian sign was positioned right to the entrance and below it we can see the standard multilingual inscription

11 BARTHA Csilla – LAIHONEN, Petteri – SZABÓ Tamás Péter (2013): Nyelvi tájkép kisebbségben és többségben. Egy új kutatási területről. In *Pro Minoritate*, Vol. 23, No. 3.

indicating that it is a historical monument emphasising thus the national affiliation of the institution (Picture 15).

The situation of the Reformed Secondary School is similar (Picture 16); it is an establishment funded from several sources. As it is also funded by the Romanian state, the plates affixed on the façade of the school building are similar to the former. In this case the Hungarian feature of the establishment has not been emphasised.



*Picture 16: The Reformed Secondary School  
(Source: Made by the author.)*

Above the name of the establishment there is a trilingual plate written in Romanian, Hungarian and English announcing that the school also functions as an accredited English language examination centre.

The situation is completely different in case of the Hám János Roman Catholic Secondary Faith School. The school founded by the church functions in the church's own restored building; the features of the name plate are similar to those of the other secondary schools in town, its positioning being more compact. The coat of arms of the school is in Latin (Picture 17), and there are no visual elements hinting either to the name giver or the institution as a school. The only inscription in the library inside the school is in Latin, too, the gesture pointing to some kind of exclusion: if you can't understand this, you have no place here, this is ours.



*Picture 17: The Latin coat of arms of the school  
(Source: Made by the author.)*



Picture 18: Plate on “Hám János” Roman Catholic Secondary Faith School  
(Source: Made by the author.)

The emphasis on ideology and values is visible inside the school, too. As it is a church-owned establishment, the attributes of the owner cannot be missing, as in other church-funded schools in general: icons, cross etc.

Johann Ettinger Secondary School with German medium classes is a state-funded establishment.



Pictures 19–20: Johann Ettinger German Secondary School  
(Source: Made by the author.)

High up on the building façade a plate reminiscent socialism indicates the Romanian name of the establishment. It is a featureless plate that does not attract attention, many do not even notice it although the name giver’s name is written in red fonts. But above the entrance door a blue German inscription visible from afar lets the visitors know where they are; the size, proportions and fonts of plate are bigger than the Romanian plate (Picture 19–20).

There are no multilingual plates and inscriptions on the façade of the primary and secondary school with mixed medium classes. The building hosting the off-site school of administrative sciences of Babes-Bolyai University features no multilingual

plates although the university's "declared intentions" state that it pays attention to multilingualism and tuition on the establishment is trilingual.

### *Companies in Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare*

As mentioned in the introduction, the ethnic composition in *Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare* is rather diverse. As it is a border town, we could justly assume that companies try to seize all opportunities in order to address a high number of consumers and even attract shoppers beyond the border. It is not only the façades, gates or windows of the shops that indicate the governing linguistic positions of power but we deem that the inscriptions inside the shops are equally important. We have noticed that there is not even one shop, company or factory in *Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare* whose management would address the customers in any other language but the state language. Although the Zoli Husi chain of butcheries and slaughterhouses imply a Hungarian reference, their shops feature no Hungarian inscriptions.

Many international shop chains opened branches in *Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare* in the past years. Our investigation has led to the conclusion that with the exception of Lidl where the bilingual inscriptions are also visible inside, only Kaufland has exploited this possibility but in this case the use of the minority language is limited only to the inscription above the entrance (Picture 21).



*Picture 21: Opening of the new Kaufland market in January 2018  
(Source: Made by the author.)*

We have not found any multilingual inscriptions in case of multinational companies such as Dedeman or Praktiker or Auchan nor even in case of Autonet, an importer of car spare parts and dealer with national coverage even though the owner and the management are known to be Hungarians. These omissions let us conclude that either the companies are not aware of the specific ethnic composition of the city or they are not interested in acquiring patronage of this kind. All the inscriptions on the shelves in the Lidl shops are bilingual, Romanian and Hungarian, although

funny mistakes occur from time to time, which could be explainable by negligence (Picture 22).



Picture 22: Lidl – the Hungarian-speaking community was “discriminated” by five hours  
(Source: Made by the author.)

The picture is completely different in case of small local businesses. The attribute-carrying inscriptions are much more stressed in their case although we cannot find exclusively or specifically emphasised Hungarian inscriptions. In case of Maxi Turi (Picture 23), the name “turi” is a Hungarian word, the inscriptions in Romanian and Hungarian are identical in style, were positioned in a similar manner, creating an outstandingly balanced aesthetic picture.



Picture 23: Maxi Turi  
(Source: Made by the author.)

We have encountered a special situation in case of healthcare institutions. The analysis has led us to the conclusion that with the exception of the County Hospital (Picture 24) and some of its wards subordinated by the local government (Picture 25), the private medical practices do not pay attention to multilingualism at all, even though conveying information in these institutions could be lifesaving.



Picture 24: Szatmár County Emergency Hospital  
(Source: Made by the author.)



Picture 25: Outpatient ward  
(Source: Made by the author.)

The more important inscriptions in the institutions are bilingual and they try to offer precise and appropriate information to everyone. Unfortunately, the lack of multilingual inscriptions is ostentatious in case of private practices and it is so in case

of the Korall Clinic owned by Hungarian citizens: not that they are missing inside the building but even the plate on the facade is monolingual (Picture 26).



Picture 26: Korall Clinic  
(Source: Made by the author.)

## Conclusions

The analysis carried out on the linguistic landscape of *Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare* has highlighted several facts, ambivalences and further possibilities. We could think that a border town in which three nationalities have coexisted peacefully for centuries has no linguistic problems. Our analysis has highlighted some deficiencies in many areas, which are actually rights granted by law and not favours or privileges of any sort.

In accordance with the thesis of the linguistic landscape developed by Lefebvre (1991) and Trumper-Hecht (2010), the next important factors should be taken into account:

- a) the virtual space: how politicians, technocrats, linguists and other decision makers would imagine the linguistic landscape's space
- b) the real space: how the linguistic landscape is seen and interpreted by the people
- c) the reality: how languages fulfil their tasks in public

According to Marten et al.<sup>12</sup> the most often seen conflicts in multilingual spaces and communities are made by ethnic groups, who *repaint* the language: in this case the inscription "muie unguri" is a brickbat to the Hungarian inhabitants of *Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare*.

12 MARTEN, Heiko F. – VAN MELSEN, Luk – GORTER, Durk (2012): *Studying Minority Languages in the Linguistic Landscape*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.



Picture 27: Place-name sign at town entrance  
(Source: Made by the author.)

We have tried to analyse the main institutions but the investigation could be broadened to other areas, as well. We deem that it is important to constantly analyse the language use of the community as it is the easiest and most efficient way to understand the picture a community creates about itself, its language and culture and the relations between the majority and the minority, we can foster a mutual understanding of and knowledge about each other's culture, the transmission of traditions and last but not least we can make the communication easier with those foreigners wishing to become familiarised with the life of a given community.

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