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Covid-19 and the Linguistic Landscape of Berlin

Eliza Panagiotatou

University of the Aegean
elizapanagiotatou@hotmail.com

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the relation between the Covid-19 pandemic and the linguistic landscape of Berlin. The approach builds on a dynamic perspective, which sees the semiotic landscape of a city as an arena of contestation between different social groups with various interests. Berlin constitutes an interesting research site, as it is known for its superdiversity, the co-existence of numerous subcultures, as well as its variety of cultural and political centres. This paper aims at studying the manifestation of the pandemic on the linguistic landscape while focusing on the intersection between language, space, politics, and activist discourse. The data were collected during the so-called "second wave" of the pandemic and consist of posters, advertisements, stencils, and banners. In the analysis both the sign and the environment in which it is positioned are taken into consideration. While Covid-19 is a global phenomenon, which is expected to affect the linguistic landscape of most urban conglomerates, the focus of this article is set on local features and their relation to the city's profile.

1. Introduction

In the last decades an extensive body of work has focused on urban linguistic landscapes (LL), examining the signs found in public space and the indexical relations among time, space, language, and agency (Blommaert 2013) as expressed through these signs. While the first studies on LL adopted a quantitative methodology and analysed as many data as possible in order to reach reliable conclusions, in the last years research has turned to an ethnographic approach, collecting diverse data and relating them to social realities. These data are no longer restricted to "public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings", as initially conceived by Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25). Ephemeral and transient signs, regardless of their author and their placement on the LL are taken into consideration as well (Ben-Rafael & Ben-Rafael 2016), creating "a forum where different voices (and interests) join forces to create and, given time, consolidate a new reality" (Canakis 2019: 1). In this context, the signs are not seen as merely reflecting realities; they are approached as reinforcing them, through their very presence in the LL, while an ethnographic perspective is seen as essential, as it creates a context and historicises LL

research (Blommaert & Maly 2014). The analysis of indexical relations and chronotopes in the LL (Blommaert 2015, 2017; Blommaert & De Fina 2016) has served as a theoretical framework for this article while language in public space is approached as part of a wider, semiotic landscape (Jaworksi & Thurlow 2010; Pennycook 2010), which turns, through its very presence, a space into a place (Stroud & Mpendukana 2009).

The aforementioned ethnographic approach attributes a normative perspective to public spaces (Maly 2019). They are seen as instruments of power, discipline and regulation (Blommaert & Maly 2016)**,** as social arenas, where control, belonging and membership are being played out. Communication in the public space is, therefore, seen as "communication in a field of power" (Maly 2019), where semiotic regimes are organised in systematic, hierarchical ways (cf. Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck 2005: 198). In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the interplay between these instruments of power, deployed by the state to control its citizens, and the different social actors in a networked and post-digital society (cf. Maly 2019) who express themselves in other, non-official, voices, creates an interesting dialogue, which is the focus of this article.

2. The pandemic as a chronotope

Since March 2020, the presence of the Covid-19 virus has strongly influenced the lives of people living in different parts of the world and has led to changes to communication and interaction worldwide. These changes are radical and affect time, space, modes of communication, and semiotic resources, resulting in what has been described as a "re-setting of the parameters of the interaction order" (Rampton 2020) at all levels, to an extent that some predict the pandemic marks a historical threshold (e.g. Friedman 2020). At the same time, while globalisation has been a reality for decades, the advent of Covid-19 suddenly made the planet appear more interconnected than ever, as people (and states) worldwide seem to share a common goal: protecting themselves against a new threat in the form of a virus.

At this time of change and danger, the so-called fight against the pandemic has become a priority for many states, which approach the virus as a threat for all. Consequently, state regulations, although they might differ from one location to another, have something in common: they all aim at keeping people apart from each other (cf. Adami et al. 2020: 3). As expected, this new priority soon found its way into the linguistic landscapes of cities worldwide, as a variety of top-down signs would start addressing issues of public health and guiding citizens on how to follow new rules and regulation. In this context, the unprecedented role of linguistic landscape in reconfiguring public space, communicating public health, and transforming social relationships becomes evident. [1]

Following the theoretical framework presented so far, the pandemic can be described using the Bakhtinian concept of the *chronotope* (Bakhtin 1981). However, while in most studies on linguistic landscape, chronotopes are found to indicate the interplay between local characteristics and social groups, manifesting themselves on the walls of

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[1] At the same time, in linguistics and health communication studies, projects have started to examine representations, discourses and metaphors of the pandemic (e.g. Back, Tulsky & Arnold 2020; Archakis 2020).

cities and "invok(ing) orders of indexicality valid in a specific timespace frame" (Blommaert & De Fina 2016: 7), in the time of the pandemic space does not appear to be local anymore; it has become global, as movement of populations has come to stand for movement of the virus. At the same time, while space appears global, "the physical world people inhabit and navigate has shrunk for those on lockdown, while for all it is newly regulated, oftentimes also marked visually by all sorts of signage and materially through the redesign of public spaces" (Adami et al 2020: 7). This new order results in new semiotic regimes, on which I focus here.

3. The field: Berlin

While Covid-19 has interwoven the world even more than it might have seemed possible some years ago, this study focuses on the local manifestations of the pandemic and the subsequent discourses reflected on the LL of a major European capital. Berlin, with a population of 3.3 million, has been described as a *global city*, one of the places which are anchored in spaces beyond the nation, consisting of diverse groups of others, who are perceived to continuously change the nature of the city (Waksman & Shohamy 2010: 57). At the same time, Berlin is internationally renowned as a centre of culture, science, business and a major tourist attraction (Ben-Rafael & Ben-Rafael 2016: 199-200). The LL of the city reflects its demography, as a multi-facetted, superdiverse city, which for decades has been receiving large numbers of migrants and refugees, as well as its characteristic as a centre of culture and arts. The visibility of migrant populations is reflected in the prevalence of Turkish and Arabic in some of Berlin's neighbourhoods, while at the same time, English is used as a universal lingua franca on the LL of the so-called downtown of the city (Ben-Rafael & Ben-Rafael 2016: 209).

4. Berlin's linguistic landscape and the Covid-19 pandemic

This article aims at analysing the different signs found in the LL of Berlin during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. It includes both public signs, issued by authorities, and private ones, issued by individuals, associations or organisations (Shohamy 2010: xi), including graffiti, street-art and posters. Both types of signs coexist in what has been described as the public sphere, "a buffer in modern societies between the state and private life, where civil society crystallizes as a driving force of the wider public" (Habermas 1989 cited in Ben Rafael 2009: 40). This coexistence of signs issued by different authors in the LL of a city is directly related to power relations, which are in turn reflected in the way these authors make use of public space. This article explores the relation between public signs and signs of protest on the LL of Berlin in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.1 Public signs

Public signs have been described as the "top-down flow", since they often originate from public bodies and aim at the diffusion of information and the control of their recipients (Shohamy 2010: xvii). During the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an unprecedented and abrupt appearance of public signs focusing on public health and regulating movement of human bodies in the LL of many big cities, including Berlin. Interestingly, while these

messages are regulative, their spatial scope, which is characteristic for a large number of normative signs used by authorities (Maly 2019), is not necessarily related to the spaces where they are found. More often than not, their semiotic scope aims at regulating the recipients' attitudes on the whole, in every space, indexing the prevalence of the pandemic in all places where human bodies interact with each other.

These public signs include posters, screens and stickers, and are found in places where large numbers of passers-by are expected to encounter them: on squares, central streets, subways, bus stops and other central locations in the city, alongside means of public transportation. In the following, I will focus on the use of linguistic structures alongside other semiotic resources found on large posters where state institutions address the public.

After collecting a large number of public signs related to the Covid-19 pandemic, it became clear that the texts on these signs employ personal pronouns in a systematic way. Due to their complexity, pronouns are interesting examples of indexical categories which have both semantic/referential and indexical/pragmatic meaning, and whose referential value depends on their indexical value (Silverstein 1976). This "non-specific, minimally characterizing nature of deictics" (Sidnell & Enfield 2016), such as pronouns, with their "semantic deficiency" (Levinson 2004), makes context indispensable, with indexical relations being crucial to contextual inference, reflexivity and semantic interpretation (Hanks 1999). In all examples of this category, the context of use is the time of the pandemic and the pronouns refer to a more or less unspecified collectivity.

The first poster analysed is part of a campaign of the city of Berlin. During my fieldwork I encountered it in many locations, such as the subway station of Alexanderplatz (picture 1), a central point in the city and one of its largest subway stations. The message of this poster consists of plain text, stating (in German): *Our resolutions for 2021 are: to reduce contacts, to follow hygiene rules and to get vaccinated*. By starting the utterance with the pronoun *our* a collectivity is brought to the foreground. The recipient of the message is addressed as part of this collectivity and is expected to follow the rules, which are presented as shared by everyone who belongs to the said group.

One of the functions of the collective first-person plural perspective is the foregrounding and repetition of boundaries. According to Tajfel (1982), identification with a group is based both on awareness of inclusion and on sentimental commitment and attachment to this act of inclusion. In picture 1, both awareness and commitment are brought into the here and now of the message and the recipient is called to act accordingly. A similar rhetoric is found in the second picture, where the text is formulated in English (*What can we change today? The number of infections tomorrow*). Again, the pronoun *we* creates a collectivity, "pointing out the common in group memberships" (Scollon & Scollon 1995:37), and can be interpreted as a call for shared action.

A similar moral obligation is evoked in the third picture, which states that *We get vaccinated, but grandma gets to go first*. Here the text is accompanied by a picture of a smiling elderly woman who is being vaccinated. Similar to the first poster, a collectivity is evoked in this example as well. According to the slogan, all people who belong to this collectivity share the will to get vaccinated and they all understand that elderly people are to go first. Again, a grammatical feature, the collective first-person plural *we*, is used

as "a mode of social interaction" (Schegloff, Ochs & Thompson 1996: 29) relating group membership to solidarity. The consent of the recipient is presupposed, thereby indexing unequal power relations in public discourse.

In the fourth example, the collective perspective is combined with the first-person singular *I* (*My discipline is our best medicine*). Here, the possessive form of the pronoun *I* invokes a double indexicality, as it refers to "my place as a material singularity in space and time as an embodied speaker, and my standing as an individual in the local moral order" (Harré 2014: ix). This order is reinforced, as it is followed by the collective perspective of the first-person plural (*our medicine*) and coupled with the word *discipline*, bringing to the foreground the moral component of the message. Moreover, the use of both perspectives (personal and collective) in one utterance combines them in an interesting way. While the individual stands in the centre of the utterance, personal responsibility is brought to the foreground, as a way to protect what follows, namely the collectivity (*our medicine*). It can be argued that the individual becomes part of the collectivity the moment s/he decides to follow rules obviously dictated from above.

A similar argument is expressed in the last example of this category (picture 5). Here, the collective perspective is created through reference to the country by its name. According to the playfully ambivalent text, *Germany rolls up its sleeves*. This slogan is accompanied by three pictures of young people who were all vaccinated shortly before the picture was taken. The decision to use the picture of a person of colour, alongside a young blond male and a female, suggests an inclusive image of a nation, which foregrounds a common goal and not common ancestry. Hard work and a positive attitude towards vaccination are presented as characteristic for this group, while the word *Germany* is used to create a collectivity consisting of those who live in the country. Again, similar to the use of the collective first-person pronoun *we*, group membership on the part of the recipient can be achieved if one follows the rules, regardless of their physical traits.
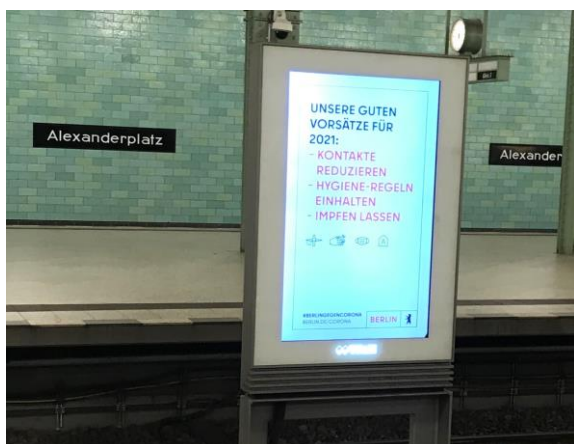
Picture 1
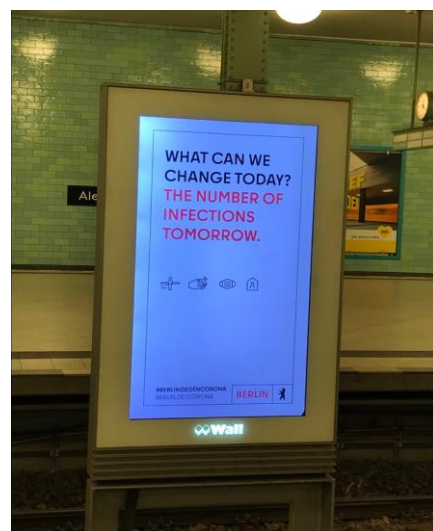
Picture 2

Picture 3

Picture 4

Picture 5

While all examples analysed so far strongly rely on written texts and use language to refer to a collective perspective and introduce a moral obligation alongside the concept of solidarity, another campaign, issued by the city's public transportation company, makes use of humour in order to make its goal explicit. The following pictures are found in subways, mostly in the form of large stickers on the ground, and illustrate the distance of 1,5 meters, which one is expected to keep from others, by comparing it to various objects, like for example three corgis (picture 6), a pony (picture 7), five beer crates (picture 8) or two kebab skewers (picture 9). The last image (picture 10) is mostly found as a poster on bus stops; an empty seat and a mask are accompanied by a text saying: *Dear masks, please wear a Berliner*.

This kind of signs appeared during the second wave of the pandemic. After the first months, it can be argued that the public got used to simple signs based on text accompanied by recurring images and indicating that the use of a mask is mandatory or that one has to keep distance from others or wash their hands on a regular basis. By using semiotic resources that do not necessarily relate to the pandemic, the campaign issued by Berlin's public transportation authority aims at drawing the public's attention to its message. Due to the fact that these signs are found in a LL where every sign has to compete with numerous others for the public's attention (cf. Ben-Rafael & Ben Rafael 2016), the signs of this campaign aim at presenting themselves in a most favourable light, as they satisfy the recipients' aspirations by surprising them and drawing their attention to their content (cf. Beasley & Danesi 2002).

Picture 6

Picture 7

Picture 8

Picture 9

Picture 10

4.2 Protest signs

While the signs analysed so far present a homogenous image of a collectivity which stands united while following official rules and regulations, the image becomes more complicated if one looks at the so-called "bottom-up signs" (Shohamy 2010: xvii). These include graffiti, street art, posters and banners, and their analysis brings to the foreground the different voices that interact with each other as well as with public discourse in the city of Berlin and do not necessarily identify with state politics and official discourse. In this section I focus on signs which express a form of political protest while making reference to the semiology of the ongoing pandemic. I use the term *protest signs*, as they all share a disagreement with some aspect of official politics or citizen behaviour during the Covid-19 pandemic and it is this disagreement which motivates their appearance on the LL. These signs of protest, in the form of alternative voices expressed on the LL of Berlin, are in other words activated by official discourse, and their coexistence with public signs turns the LL into an arena of contestation and negotiation.

4.2.1   Street art

The first pictures constitute examples of street art, a form of art Berlin is known for (Papen 2012). Street art refers to works which use the street as an indispensable aspect of their meaning (Riggle 2010). They include both large painted pieces as well as small stencils and stickers. The first example (picture 11) is located in Mauerpark, in the area of Prenzlauer Berg. It depicts a young and beautiful woman of colour and is followed by the slogan *Women are system-relevant*. The word *system-relevant* has been added to the vocabulary widely used in Covid-19 times. It is found in media reports and is used by politicians when they refer to professionals working in high-importance sectors. These include the health sector, those working in public administration, infra-structure services, food supplies as well as education. After a year of exposure to the discourse of the pandemic, *system-relevant* has, among other expressions, become part of the vocabulary many people use when talking to each other. This graffiti makes use of a semiotic recourse

of the pandemic, its vocabulary, and combines it with a feminist claim. By referring to all women as system-relevant, it aims at foregrounding the discussion on the invisible work performed by women in everyday life. This work is not only unpaid but also not valued, despite the fact that it is necessary for the system to continue functioning the way it does. The graffiti under analysis combines several frames of reference: it depicts a woman of colour in order to refer to all women and it combines female identity with typical Covid-19 vocabulary. The presence of all the aforementioned underscores the polysemy of political discourse (Jewitt 2009) while, at the same time, contesting the legitimacy of the established point of view on the role of women as well as the argument of system-relevance being applied only to certain groups of professionals and excluding other individuals who, nevertheless, perform necessary work (cf. Ben Said & Kasanga 2016).

A similar polysemy is found in the second example of this category (picture 12). Here, the character of Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings* is depicted holding a roll of toilet paper and calling it *My precious.* The image refers to the practice of hoarding toilet paper. After the announcement of new regulations, lockdowns and shop closures, basic goods, including toilet paper, repeatedly disappeared from supermarket shelves. The artist refers to this practice, uses the image of the Gollum and gives him a voice, in which he addresses the toilet paper as if it were an object of inestimable value. This graffiti combines various semiotic resources while using humour and irony in order to comment on the aforementioned practice. At the same time, the artist questions the public's priorities in the time of the pandemic, as what is being described as precious is merely a roll of toilet paper.

The same topic is repeated in a number of signs found on the LL of Berlin, including stencils (picture 13), banners (picture 14) and stickers (picture 15). In picture 13 a mouse is surrounded by toilet paper. Next to this image one can read the words *corona protection*. Again, different semiotic resources are combined. The image of the virus as a round spiky ball and the mouse which is surrounded by toilet paper are accompanied by the word *protection*, a word widely used by official discourse in Covid-19 times. This multimodal combination of text and image, a form of intertextuality, foregrounds "the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth" (Fairclough 1992: 84). This stencil stands as an ironical comment to the already mentioned practice of hoarding toilet paper in times of perceived threat. Finally, both the banner (picture 14) and the sticker (picture 15) refer to the same practice, urging people to stop hoarding toilet paper.

Picture 11

Picture 13

Picture 12

Picture 14

Picture 15

4.2.2 Political slogans (of protest)

In the following part of the analysis I will focus on signs with a more direct political message. The first one (picture 16) depicts two banners hanging out of a window in the neighbourhood of Neukölln. This area was traditionally home to a high number of migrants, especially Arabs. Over the last decade, gentrification has turned Neukölln into a centre of nightlife, and today a large number of students, young professionals, and artists reside in the neighbourhood. The banners in picture 16 constitute an example of a series of similar slogans which could be seen at balconies and in windows in various neighbourhoods in the first months of 2021. As demonstrations were highly controlled, organisations asked their supporters to hang banners from their windows in order to express their views. In picture 16 the banner on the right states that *Not everyone has a home* followed by the slogan *Solidarity during corona* while the one on the left states that *Racism is deadlier than corona*. Both texts stand in dialogue with the official discourse on the pandemic and are, therefore, further examples of intertextuality. While the *Stay home, stay safe* slogan has become omnipresent in the media and public discourse since the beginning of the pandemic, state politics made provisions for home-office, and closed schools and urged citizens to stay at home as much as possible. The banner takes up this discourse and answers to it by stating that one has to have a home in order to be able to stay there, implying that state politics have been ignoring those who do not have homes. By referring to these populations, the authors index a positive stance towards them. The rhetoric of exclusion the banners refer to is not found on the LL of Berlin, it is, however, present in the media and in public discourse. In this sense, these banners are highly intertextual, as they respond to a rhetoric which is an "uninscribed presence on the LL" (Canakis 2019), but is, however, omnipresent in media and ideological agendas.

The second sentence of the banner uses the term solidarity, a term which is often interpreted and an "index of the left-of-centre ideological affiliation" of the authors of certain messages (Canakis 2019). However, as already mentioned in the analysis of public signs, in the time of the pandemic official state discourse has made use of the concept of

solidarity as well. In picture 16 the authors attempt to reclaim the concept for themselves by placing the slogan *Solidarity during corona* next to the texts *Racism is deadlier than corona* and *Not everyone has a home*, therefore presenting solidarity in a completely different way than public discourse has been doing. It is not social distancing, respect of regulations or vaccination that are foregrounded as acts of solidarity, but rather support for the ones who are in a less favourable position: for the weak, the homeless, the migrants, the refugees. What was presented as homogenous in the first part of the analysis, where official state discourse was found to use the first-person plural in public campaigns in order to create a collectivity, is now split into smaller parts through political protest.

A similar breach of the concept of solidarity and the image of homogeneity propagated by official state discourse is found in picture 17, depicting a sprayed message which translates: C*ough on cops*. This text has a humorous undertone and contradicts, at the same time, the homogenous picture of a collectivity whose members take care of each other and prioritise common goals. According to its authors, the divisions which used to exist before Covid-19, between us and them, citizens and police, did not cease to exist in the times of the pandemic and citizens are urged to make use of Covid-19 as a form of weapon against police. Again, the homogeneity implied by official posters in public spaces is fought against by those who share different political views than the ones expressed in mainstream media.

The following two images (pictures 18 and 19) depict a stencil and a sprayed slogan with similar syntax and similar messages. The first one states that: *Corona kills, capitalism does so too*, while the second one translates: *Corona divides, capitalism does so too*. In both cases, several frames of reference are present, as Covid-19 is compared to capitalism and is found to be similar, drawing the recipients' attention to the fact that capitalism is as dangerous as a disease and that citizens should be protected from it. A similar argument is expressed on the banner on picture 16, comparing racism to the pandemic (*Racism is deadlier than corona*). The presence of different frames of reference in these messages underscores their multidimensionality and is characteristic of political discourse (cf. Bhatia 2006). At the same time, it contests the legitimacy of the established system, capitalism, by comparing it to a pandemic (cf. Ben Said & Kasanga 2016) and concludes that both are dangerous and, therefore, both should be fought against.

Finally, the last picture (20) was found on the shopwindow of a bar in Friedrichshain, a neighbourhood also known for its numerous cafés, bars and restaurants. On the poster the word *Closed* is combined with the slogan *Without us Berlin is only poor*. Here, the placement of the text on the shopwindow of a bar which is closed due to Covid-19 regulations is crucial to understanding its meaning (cf. Scollon & Scollon 2003). At the same time, the slogan of the poster constitutes a further example of intertextuality, as it refers to Klaus Wowereit, ex-mayor of Berlin, who famously called the city of Berlin "poor but sexy" in 2003. The poster directly refers to this utterance and claims that, without nightlife, Berlin will be only poor, as it was the presence of bars and nightlife that gave the city the image of being "poor but sexy".

Picture 16
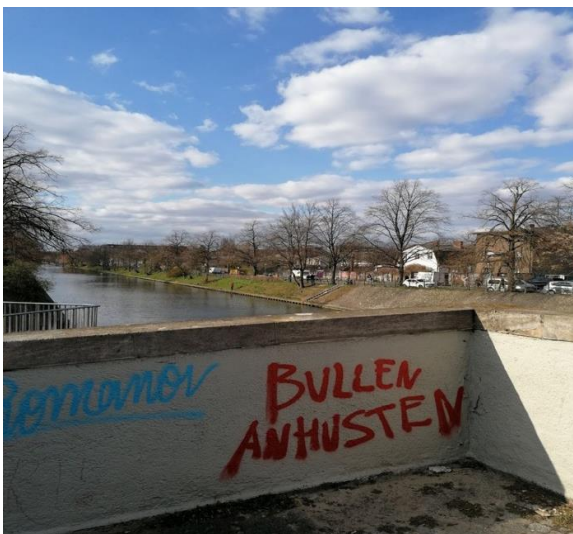
Picture 18

Picture 17

Picture 19

Picture 20

5. Conclusions

During the Covid-19 pandemic, both types of signs, public signs and signs of protest, co-exist in the LL of Berlin. Through their existence both sides propagate and reproduce their ideologies. However, their analysis suggests that they operate in different ways. While pubic signs are present in squares, central stations, subways, bus stops, and other, similar central locations, where a large number of passers-by is expected to encounter them, protest signs are mostly found on walls, lamp posts, balconies, etc. in off-centre neighbourhoods and residential areas. Their differential placement on the LL of the city indicates the power relations between their authors. While the state uses public signs to control the public and create an image of homogeneity during the pandemic by using a

mechanism of power, political protest stands for alternative voices, which react to the control exerted by state mechanisms.

Moreover, while the creation of a homogenous identity and the image of a collectivity which stands united has been one of the established goals of state politics during the Covid-19 pandemic, this image is contested in the signs of protest found in various locations in the city. This coexistence of both official and alternative voices reflects the fact that various groups are active in the city with different, often contradicting interests. Their co-existence turns the LL of Berlin into an arena of contestation and presents the city as a site of conflict and exclusion, despite the unprecedented effort made by public discourse to construct a homogenous image of harmony and solidarity against a common threat. Through the analysis of the signs presented in this article, these tensions between hegemonic discourses and political activism are revealed.

Interestingly, both public campaigns and protest signs seem to address a population of German-speaking recipients. While some of the public signs were translated into English, none were found in languages like Turkish or Arabic. Despite the existence of large numbers of migrants and refugees in the city, and despite the presence of their languages in the LL, their voices seem to be absent in the Covid-19 LL and their needs are represented through slogans formulated by groups showing them their solidarity. The recipients of both public discourse and signs of protest are, therefore, mainly the German- and English-speaking population of the city.

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