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Commercial discourses, gentrification and citizens' protest: The linguistic landscape of Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin[1]

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Since reunification in 1990, Prenzlauer Berg, located in the former East Berlin, has turned from a cheap and neglected area into a popular middle-class neighbourhood. The area's new character is reflected in its linguistic landscape. These days the signs of posh shops and trendy bars adorn its streets. But alternative views are noticeable too. Graffiti is present even on the most expensively refurbished buildings and residents put up slogans to protest against their flats being refurbished and sold to new owners. This case study of the changing graphic environment of Prenzlauer Berg shows that, despite the strong influence of commercial discourses, the public space remains an area of contestation between civil society, private businesses and the state. The particular approach to linguistic landscape I developed combines textual and visual analysis with interviews with sign producers. This has enabled me to show how the linguistic landscape both reflects as well as shapes social change and urban development in Berlin since reunification.

Seit der Wende ist der Prenzlauer Berg, zu DDR Zeiten vernachlässigt und heruntergekommen, zu einem der beliebtesten Stadtteile des neuen Berlins geworden. Der neue Charakter des Kiez, sichtbar an seinen renovierten Häusern und steigenden Mietpreisen, lässt sich auch anhand seiner sprachlichen Landschaft (linguistic landscape) erkennen. Heutzutage bestimmen die aufwendig gestalteten Schilder teurer Geschäfter und schicker Bars Prenzlauer Bergs Strassenbild. Es gibt aber auch andere Stimmen. Bewohner von Häusern, die an Investoren verkauft wurden und denen nun gesteigerte Mieten drohen, protestieren mit Plakaten gegen die Politik der Ankäufer. Fast keine der neu gestrichenen Fassaden ist frei von Graffiti und überall findet man Poster, die zu Demonstrationen und Unterschriftenaktionen auffordern. Ausgehend von Fotografien und Interviews mit den Autoren von Schildern, Plakaten und Transparenten zeigt der vorliegende Artikel, dass der öffentliche Raum – die Strasse – trotz der Dominanz kommerziellen Diskurse, ein Bereich bleibt, in dem Staat, private Inverstoren und bürgerliche Gesellschaft aufeinander treffen und ihre – oftmals im Konflikt zueinander stehenden – Meinungen zum Ausdruck bringen. [German]

KEYWORDS: Linguistic landscape, Berlin, commercial discourses, gentrification, German

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INTRODUCTION

Since the fall of the wall in 1990, Berlin's reputation as a metropolis has steadily grown. Internationally, Berlin is striving to market itself as a European capital equal in standing with London and Paris. The administrative, economic and cultural changes that ensued from the end of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) regime and reunification have brought significant changes to many parts of the city. Of particular interest are those neighbourhoods, once hidden in the east, which have now moved to the centre of the new Berlin. Prenzlauer Berg, in the north-east of Berlin, is one such area. After reunification, Prenzlauer Berg, neglected by the GDR regime, quickly became popular. Thanks in part to its now central location close to the city's new 'Mitte' and famously rebuilt Potsdamer Platz, in the years since 1990 Prenzlauer Berg has reinvented itself from a primarily working-class area to a fashionable neighbourhood, desired by property investors and tourists and popular amongst families with children.

The study reported in this paper examines the changing linguistic landscape (LL) of Prenzlauer Berg from the mid 1980s until today. Linguistic landscape (Landry and Bourhis 1997; Shohamy, Ben-Rafael and Barni 2010) research refers to the study of texts in public spaces. Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) argue that the analysis of a neighbourhood's LL allows us to make inferences about its character and image, its population and the relationship between public authority and civil society. Shop signs, graffiti and political banners illustrate the role texts play in shaping a neighbourhood's character and reputation. Shop signs, for example, by their choice of language, metaphors, images and materials, signal to passersby what sort of person is expected to shop here. Linguistic landscapes mark space in specific ways, as 'belonging' to certain population groups. In the case of Prenzlauer Berg, much of its LL these days signals that this is a trendy and expensive neighbourhood, the home of 'yuppies' as the new inhabitants are sometimes called. Other signs, for example political banners or graffiti, signal opposition to the way the neighbourhood has changed. The present paper examines individual LL items in the light of wider questions concerning the neighbourhood's recent development, linking LL research to contemporary debates about urban politics and gentrification. Following Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) it assumes that changes in political regimes, in economic conditions and in the social make-up of the residents are reflected in a neighbourhood's linguistic landscape. The LL itself, however, is not only making such changes visible to the public eye, it is also a motor fuelling the process of change: new shops carrying fancy names not only reveal a change in the population structure, they also signal to private investors and those who might think of moving to the neighbourhood that this is an up-and-coming trendy area, ready for new residents. LL items, as Leeman and Modan suggest, are 'productive signs' that 'can affect those who would visit, work or live in a given neighbourhood' (2009: 332).

In order to understand the relationship between an area's linguistic landscape, its social make-up and public image, I draw on historical and sociological studies

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of Prenzlauer Berg. I rely on policy reports to understand the role of state-run and privately driven development initiatives that impacted on the area's graphic environment. The study draws on and further develops the contextualised approach to LL research initiated by Leeman and Modan (2009, 2010), which I combine with a diachronic perspective suggested by Pavlenko (2010). My study pays attention to both written texts and visual images in Prenzlauer Berg's LL, thereby contributing to the recently introduced idea of 'semiotic' rather than 'linguistic' landscapes (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010). Methodologically, it relies on a combination of textual and visual analysis with interviews with shop owners, neighbourhood activists and street artists. This combination of perspectives and theories enables me to examine in a new way the role of language (and image) in public places, in particular with regard to processes of urban development and renewal, as experienced in Prenzlauer Berg. In so doing, the article shows how LL research, used primarily to shed light on aspects of multilingualism, can be harnessed to seek insights into much broader issues relating to social change, urban renewal, gentrification and its concomitant class tensions.

LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE RSEARCH: BEYOND THE STUDY OF MULTILINGUALISM

The majority of LL studies investigate the role of different languages in a city's graphic environment, seeking to understand the 'multiliterate ecology of cities' (Spolsky 2009: 32). Signs are examined less in terms of their specific content, but with more regard to what languages are used and what this tells us about the relationship between different languages and their speakers. Cenoz and Gorter (2006) suggest that the linguistic landscape not only reflects the status of different languages in society, but that it also acts as a force shaping how languages are being perceived and used by the population. The LL of a specific neighbourhood, for example, marks the geographical space inhabited by a language group (Landry and Bourhis 1997). It indexes a kind of sociolinguistic reality that bears on public behaviour and relationships between people living in and beyond this specific area.

But public writings are interesting not only for the language(s) used, and, in recent years, LL research has begun to widen its scope. Leeman and Modan (2009, 2010), for example, discuss the changing linguistic landscape of Washington D.C.'s Chinatown in the light of urban planning policies. They argue that language displayed on streets is constrained by municipal, regional and national policies. Taking a similar approach, the study reported in this paper examines linguistic landscapes as indexical of but also shaped by wider processes of social change and urban development, in particular with regards to gentrification, a phenomenon familiar to many of today's cities.

Ben-Rafael (2009) advocates what he calls a sociological approach to the study of linguistic landscapes. Power relations, he argues, are one of several

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'structuration principles' shaping linguistic landscapes (2009: 45–46). Power relations no doubt are significant for understanding Prenzlauer Berg's linguistic landscape. Power is associated with the way different actors make use of public space. Commercial discourses (cf. Scollon and Scollon 2003), as will be shown, dominate much of Prenzlauer Berg's LL. But there are other voices too, some expressing alternatives or even opposition to mainstream consumer oriented ideologies. These are visible in the form of citizens' protests, community initiatives, street art and graffiti.

Most linguistic landscape research has focussed on present-day analysis of the graphic environment. Pavlenko rightly points out, though, that the LL 'is not a state but a diachronic process' (2010: 133). The contemporary LL, she argues, cannot be fully understood without examining how it developed and came about. Spolsky and Cooper (1991), who examined historical references in street signs in Jerusalem, reveal the role that changing political regimes play in shaping linguistic landscapes. A diachronic approach is also used by Leeman and Modan (2009, 2010) and Lou (2007), both working on Washington D.C.'s Chinatown.

DEFINING LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE: SPACE AND PLACE

At the centre of LL research are material forms of language visible in public spaces. But public space is not a given physical container; it is socially constructed. This non-essentialist notion of space, which is nowadays widely recognised in geography and sociology (see for example Harvey 2006), can be traced back to Henri Lefebvre. As a Marxist, Lefebvre was certainly not ignorant of the material forces driving urban development. But he also saw space as a social product (Lefebvre 1991). He suggested that we need to examine the role of conceptual practices – such as planning documents – in urban development. Furthermore, he pointed to the importance of images and mental representations of space, and the discourses these are framed in. Lefebvre's work thus paved the way to understanding how space is constructed through social and linguistic practice.

On their own, though, Lefebvre's ideas do not sufficiently explain how language constructs space. Tuan's distinction between space and place can usefully be added here. According to Tuan (1977: 6), '"[s]pace" is more abstract than "place". What often begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value'. Language, undoubtedly, plays a part in this process. Following Tuan, Lou (2007) suggests that 'words have the power to turn a space into a place' (2007: 174; see also Stroud and Mpendukana 2009). Linguistic tokens such as billboards or banners are not added on to a given physical space, but are part of what makes and shapes this space, giving it cultural meaning and thereby turning it into 'place'. Linguistic landscape research therefore is concerned with what one could call the discursive construction of spaces (cf. Jaworski and Thurlow 2010).

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It follows from the above that public space needs to be conceived of as a contested and constantly changing arena. Space is not a given natural structure, but is both condition for and result of social processes (see Löw 2010). Social change, thus, cannot be understood without reference to space. Analysis of the LL, a constitutive element of urban spaces, is part of what allows us to understand aspects of social change, illustrated here in relation to urban development and gentrification.

GENTRIFICATION, URBAN CHANGE AND LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

Prenzlauer Berg 'has been a battleground of gentrification and displacement for the last 15–18 years' (Bernt and Holm 2009: 312). Gentrification means 'the process of upgrading urban neighbourhoods' (Bernt and Holm 2009: 312); previously neglected and declining areas are modernised and revitalised so that former working-class areas are turned into middle-class neighbourhoods. Gentrification is inherently linked to 'class transformation' (Wyly and Hammel 1999: 716) and a change in an area's social make up. Many scholars critically comment on gentrification as resulting in the displacement of poorer sections of the community (Marcuse 1986; Smith 1996).

There is no doubt that in the past 20 years Prenzlauer Berg has changed significantly. Significant numbers of low-income households have been displaced from the area (Dörfler 2005; Holm 2006; Bernt and Holm 2009). Holm's (2006) detailed investigations of Prenzlauer Berg show significant increases in average rents in the period from 1991 to 2001. Drawing on surveys carried out in 1997 and 2002, Holm (2006) and also Schmitt (2005) are able to show a marked increase in the residents' education levels and incomes. A significant increase in the number of restaurants, cafes and speciality shops has also been noted (Schmitt 2005; Holm 2006), catering for the new residents.

However, Häußermann and Kapphan (2000) doubt that economic factors were the main reason for people leaving Prenzlauer Berg, citing 'alienation' as a more important factor. Marcuse, referring to gentrification in New York, has used the phrase 'displacement pressure' (1986: 157) to denote the process of families seeing their neighbourhood change in such a way that they feel no longer at home and are ready to leave. Amongst other changes, he mentions the opening of new shops addressed to a different clientele, and new shops usually have new names and new signs. Despite the obvious role linguistic landscapes play in relation to gentrification, few LL researchers have paid attention to it. Leeman and Modan (2009, 2010) discuss how linguistic landscapes relate to urban renewal and development. The field's apparent lack of interest in gentrification is surprising given how widespread the phenomenon is in contemporary cities. When studying the linguistic landscape of Berlin, talk about gentrification is unavoidable. Conflicts and disagreement over the route Prenzlauer Berg and other parts of Berlin have taken in the past 20 years are keenly debated in the

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media and they are, as we will see, engrained in the linguistic landscape itself, public space being one of the arenas where the debate is taking place.

STUDYING THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF PRENZLAUER BERG: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The research this paper is based on is a case study of the linguistic landscape of one part of Berlin, Prenzlauer Berg, located in the north-east of the city. It combines an analysis of signs with interviews with sign producers. This approach was intended to address the critique raised by other linguistic landscape researchers arguing that without consulting sign producers, the researcher's interpretations of signs risk being one sided (Reh 2004; Jaworski and Thurlow 2010).

The study was carried out from October 2010 to May 2011. The main methods of data collection used were taking photographs, making inventories of signs on specific streets and carrying out interviews. I also made use of secondary and archival sources.

I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews of between 15 and 60 minutes length. Eighteen of my informants owned shops or cafes. Further interviews were carried out with street artists and neighbourhood activists as well as a member of the former GDR opposition. Interviews were either pre-arranged or carried out on the spot, in the respondent's shop or cafe or other public space. The main aim of the interviews was to understand the meanings of logos, names and images as well as the contents of campaign slogans and political banners. Further questions concerned typescript, colour and other visual aspects of signs as well as their materiality. During interviews I took detailed notes, which I immediately revisited after the conversation and typed up later the same day.[2] In many cases, I returned to the respondent with further questions or to seek clarification on issues raised during our first encounter.

The study focused on the area known as Helmholtzkiez. *Kiez* is a northern German expression for 'neighbourhood'. Helmholtzkiez includes Helmholtzplatz, a large open square in the north of Prenzlauer Berg, and the streets surrounding it. During my extended visits to the Kiez, I took detailed inventories of all signs on Helmholtzplatz itself as well as of six of the eight streets leading on to the square. Of these streets, I surveyed one block, leading from the square to the next intersection. To this I added Kastanienallee, one of Prenzlauer Berg's most famous streets, and its extension Pappelallee. I also included several blocks of Stargarder Strasse, leading from Schönhauser Allee (a busy commercial road) and the S-Bahn Ring (an inner city train) along Gethsemane Church, an important gathering point for the GDR opposition, up to Dunckerstrasse, close to Helmholtzplatz. These streets were chosen to reflect the diversity of the area the study was located in. Kastanienallee, in particular, was selected because of its wide pavements and its role in inner city and evening tourism. Sampling, thus, was theoretically driven but pragmatically constrained (i.e. limited to what was feasible to survey in the time given for this research).

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In addition to taking detailed notes of all signs and all other forms of writing that I detected, I took numerous photos of house and shop fronts, of graffiti, posters, stickers and street art. But to produce a complete inventory of every existing LL item, as some researchers have described doing (Cenoz and Gorter 2006; Hübner 2006), was too ambitious a goal. Graffiti is widespread in Helmholtzplatz and houses can be covered with tags that are difficult to delineate from each other. Shops might include a great number of different signs, including posters advertising specific products. Lamp posts and electricity junction boxes were often covered in layers of partly destroyed and barely visible stickers, notes and posters (see also Scollon and Scollon 2003). Further texts were found on cars or lorries.

In the following sections I discuss selected examples of LL items collected as part of my study. Figure 1 shows a map of the area including the location of the signs discussed in this article. The choice of examples reflects the most

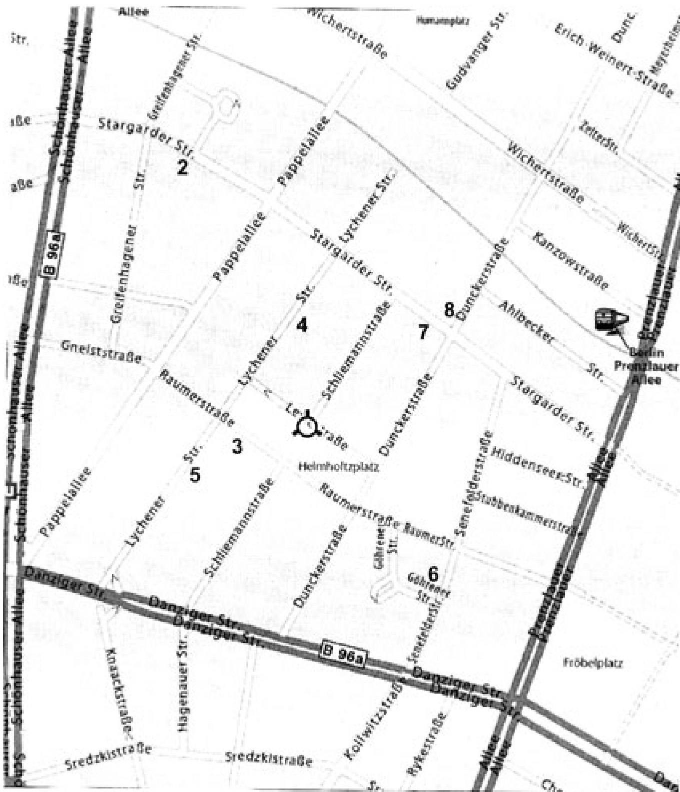

Figure 1: Map of the area around Helmholtzplatz. Numbers on the map refer to location of the LL item in the figure (2–8) of the same number (Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Helmholtzkiez.png)

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salient aspects of Prenzlauer Berg's linguistic landscape, as I experienced it while working in the area. Commercial signs, for example, are discussed prominently because they dominate the area's LL. Signs displaying critical commentaries on the neighbourhood's recent development were chosen because they made up a much smaller but still significant part of the Kiez.

PRENZLAUER BERG AND HELMHOLTZPLATZ: HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The area known as Prenzlauer Berg was built as early as the second half of the 19th century. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Berlin was a thriving centre of manufacturing attracting increasing numbers of workers and craftsmen. Districts like Prenzlauer Berg were built in response to growing needs for housing. Five-storey tenement buildings fronted the streets behind which back and side buildings were hidden. Prenzlauer Berg was a primarily working-class district although the slightly more luxurious front buildings housed a limited number of white-collar workers.

Today much of the old housing stock has been renovated, making the area a popular and relatively expensive neighbourhood. Present day Prenzlauer Berg covers an area of 11 km^2 in which approximately 146,000 people live (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg no date). World War II left the district comparatively untouched with only a little more than 10 percent of all houses being completely destroyed (Schmitt 2005). Helmholtzplatz is named after the doctor and physicist Ferdinand von Helmholtz. The district unit known as Helmholtzplatz covers an area of 81.9 ha, housing 21,211 people (Berlin Senate no date). The square, construction of which began in 1865, is an important recreational space, housing a large playground in an otherwise densely-built neighbourhood.

GDR policy, favouring the development of large prefabricated high rises (*Plattenbauten*), neglected Prenzlauer Berg. Housing conditions in the district gradually worsened and many people left the area. Over the years, the neighbourhood became a niche for students, squatters, artists, intellectuals and other outsiders who sought escape from the regime. In the West, the area became known as the site of the GDR's small 'alternative scene' (Ladd 1997: 107). Prenzlauer Berg was also an important site for the GDR opposition movement that emerged in the 1980s.

Prenzlauer Berg's art scene and opposition movement was at the origin of what is widely called the 'myth' of Prenzlauer Berg and which was pivotal in the area's rapid rise after reunification (Steglich 2004). In 1993, the Berlin Senate designated the first urban renewal areas (*Sanierungsgebiete*), amongst them Helmholtzplatz. Renewal of the area's dilapidated housing followed a series of principles aiming to stop low-income groups from being displaced. Between 1991 and 1997, renovation in Helmholtzplatz was, to a considerable extent, publicly financed and this has allowed for a more socially sensitive renewal

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policy with greater rent control (Andrej Holm personal communication 2011). In later years, though, the financial crisis resulted in public funds being cut. Greater reliance on private investment limited the city's ability to control rents (Bernt and Holm 2005). At the time of my research, Helmholtzplatz was still a designated renewal area.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRENZLAUER BERG'S LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE SINCE THE MID 1980s

As the visitor to Helmholtzkiez will not fail to notice, its linguistic landscape is dominated by commercial signs. Houses in this gentrified neighbourhood display a variety of colourful and appealingly designed shops signs. Noticeable too are the many signs of bars and restaurants. But things were different before reunification.

In the mid 1980s, Prenzlauer Berg, once densely populated and lively, had turned into a bleak and run-down area. These developments were visible as much in the state of houses as in the area's linguistic landscape. Photographs of Helmholtkiez before 1990 show many closed shop fronts, indicating that in the 1970s and 80s many shops went out of business (see, for example, the photographs in Venohr 2010: 66–67). Mostly, shop names were written directly onto the house fronts. As the house facades decayed, so did the signs – with colours fading and paint flaking, names were left only partially readable.

Around Helmholtzplatz most shops catered to everyday needs rather than luxury goods. A butcher's shop in Stargarder Strasse, photographed in 1986, shows the sign *Fleischerei* ('butcher') in brown letters on green background (Prenzlauer Berg 1996). On the sides, the words *Wurstwaren* and *Fleischwaren* inform passersby that this shop sells both cooked and cold meats as well as raw meat. The sign is made of painted glass panels attached on top and on both sides of the window. There is no other decoration and no slogan to entice customers to enter the shop.

After reunification, things quickly changed. The bleak (linguistic) landscape of Prenzlauer Berg quickly succumbed to the glamour of colourful advertising plates and billboards. New shops arrived. A collection of short articles capturing the changing scene of Prenzlauer Berg in spring 1990 describes the changes as 'breathtaking' and the shops as becoming more 'Western' (Röhl 1990: 26). One of the first advertising slogans to appear in Prenzlauer Berg, ironically, were those of the cigarette brand 'go West' (Röhl 1990: 80).

In Helmholtzkiez, too, things changed. Commercial rents had never been subject to state control and were governed solely by market conditions. In the late 1990s, when Helmholtzplatz was up and coming, many of the old traders could no longer afford the increasing rents (Steglich 2004; Dörfler 2005). Grocery stores, newsagents and neighbourhood pubs were replaced by new bars and shops catering to the interests of the new residents and visitors (Bernt and Holm 1998). Photographs from Prenzlauer Berg before reunification and in the years

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after show how quickly the area's linguistic landscape changed, reflecting the wider social change the neighbourhood experienced. (Prenzlauer Berg 1996; Venohr 2010; see also Roder and Tacke 2004; Landesarchiv Berlin no date; Prenzlauer Berg Museum Archiv no date). With the area being up and coming, commercial signs became a prominent part of the neighbourhood's linguistic landscape.

COMMERCIAL SIGNS IN 2011

Today's Prenzlauer Berg combines residential homes with shops, bars and cafes. Most of the buildings house one or two shops on the ground level, the upper levels being taken up by flats. These shops are usually small and individually owned. They might sell women's and children's clothing, toys, records, books or organic food. Many of the ground-level stores house the surgeries of general practitioners, osteopaths or teachers of Tai Chi, or the offices of architects and designers. There are also small galleries and Helmholtzkiez is known for its many cafes, restaurants and bars. The mixture of shops, cafes and galleries, many brandishing inventive names and professionally-designed signs, gives the area its atmosphere as a residential yet lively neighbourhood, attractive to local residents as much as to tourists and visitors from other parts of Berlin.

'No socks no panties' (Figure 2) is one such new shop. It sells second-hand clothing for women. The shop, which opened in 2002, is located in Stargarder Strasse, close to Gethsemane Church, a landmark of GDR opposition. It is located about five minutes walk away from Helmholtzplatz.

Figure 2: 'No socks no panties', Stargarder Strasse, November 2010

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Ms L., the shop's owner, had originally called her shop 'Bellybutton' but, because another company owned the copyright to the name, she could not keep it. She used to often listen to music by the band 'Lamb Chops' and one of their songs contains the line 'you've lost your socks and panties'. Ms L. does not sell socks or panties in her shop.

When asked why she chose an English name she explains that she 'wanted to stay with English' (*wollte beim Englischen bleiben*); 'I don't like to mix' (*ich mag nicht mischen*), she adds. Germans use the English phrase 'second hand' for businesses selling used clothing. She wanted to have a 'nice name' (*schöner Name*), something you cannot find everywhere, not '08/15' (a German expression for 'common' or 'ordinary'). The name is important, she comments. It was chosen to mark out her shop as unique and different from others (cf. Bogatto and Helot 2010).

The typeface of the writing on the shop window was chosen by Ms L. when she first opened the shop. She liked it because it is 'simple' (*einfach*) and 'easy to decipher' (*gut entzifferbar*). It is 'plain' (*schlicht*) but also 'playful' (*verspielt*). Although the shop itself is painted in pink, she found this too 'girly' a colour for the sign. Following advice from a friend and fellow shop owner, she chose a silver-grey colour that is visible at night. The choice of colour, thus, was partly pragmatic. The shop displays no signs other than the writing on its window. On the right side of the shop window is the small sign of a school of Karate and Tai Chi located in the rear building of this property.

Customers frequently ask Ms L. what 'panties' means, indicating that the denotative content of the name is not necessarily understood. But the language does not only have a communicative function, it also carries symbolic value (Kelly-Holmes 2005). Symbolic use of English, French, Italian and other languages has been discussed widely by linguistic landscape researchers (see for example Schlick 2003; Backhaus 2007). English, as these researchers have found, is generally associated with globalisation and modern life. As anybody walking through the streets of Berlin can easily see, its use in German outdoor advertising is widespread. Words such as 'sale' have become common usage. 'Sale', as one shop owner in the neighbourhood told me, 'sounds more modern' (*hört sich moderner an*). Another shop owner explained that 'sale' is shorter than the German *Ausverkauf*, which would take up too much space in her shop window.

The language chosen for a shop sign, Lou (2007) suggests, indicates the intended reader of that sign and thus the desired customer. That Ms L.'s shop has an English name is reflective of the neighbourhood's changed population and character. As explained earlier, residents are generally more educated and wealthier than before 1990. Not only has it become common to use English words and phrases in German advertising, the new residents of Prenzlauer Berg can also be assumed to have become more proficient in English. A further change is that the Kiez has become attractive to tourists, who are part of the shop's clientele.

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Sign authors are not necessarily concerned with their sign not being immediately understood by the customer. In several cases I found that the name had more to do with the owner's personality or biography than the nature of the business. A small bar on Helmholtzplatz, owned by a Portuguese-Greek couple, is called 'EKA'. EKA is short for *ehemalige Kellnerarmee* ('former army of waiters'). Before opening their bar, the owners were employed as waiters in bars and cafes, often working long hours, frequently conflicting with their boss and receiving low pay. Simple personal preferences also shaped owners' decisions. For EKA's sunblind, the owner chose a flower motif, because this is what she liked best. Seemingly mysterious names such as 'EKA' point to the usefulness of the interview-based approach used in this study. Had I not talked to Ms L. or to the owners of EKA, I would not have been able to understand the signs' intended meanings.

A shop's name could also be inspired by somebody the owner knew. 'Spielzeugland Ratzekatz' is a toy shop on Helmholtzplatz (Figure 3). *Ratzekatz* (*Katz* meaning 'cat') is what a little girl who visited the owner's friend called the cat living in his shared flat. The shop's logo is based on a drawing of the cat the girl had made. To ensure that the nature of the shop was easily identifiable, the owner added *Spielzeugland* ('land of toys') as a descriptor to the name. Figure 3 shows that Ratzekatz Spielzeugland is housed in a building that is covered in signs. Most of this is graffiti, some of it put on by the shop owner himself, with

Figure 3: 'Spielzeugland Ratzekatz', Helmholtzplatz, December 2010

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permission from the house owner. A closer look at the house front reveals an interesting mixture of authorised and commercial and non-authorised and non-commercial graffiti. Using the stencilling technique common amongst graffiti artists, the shop owner painted the shop's cat logo all over the house front. There is also a piece by the street artist El Bocho (see further below) as well as a slogan translatable as 'Prenzlauer Berg says one can buy everything', undoubtedly a commentary on the (assumed) consumerist attitudes of the neighbourhood's residents. The density of signs on this shop front is in stark contrast to Prenzlauer Berg's linguistic landscape in GDR times (see above). That the shop front contains both commercial and anti-commercial statements is an indication of the different views present in the neighbourhood and visible in its linguistic landscape.

Nostalgia for times gone by is a frequent motif in tourism and city marketing (Urry 2002). A language or a typeface can be used to emphasize exoticism (Kallen 2009) and authenticity. In Prenzlauer Berg, I only found a small number of signs appealing to the *Ost-Zeit* (the era of East Germany) signalling that nostalgia for the former regime is not a high selling point in this part of Berlin. An organic food store round the corner from Helmholtzplatz is called 'Ostkost'. *Ost* ('East') refers to East Germany (the GDR) and *Kost* means 'food' or 'fare'. When the present owner took over the shop in 1999, Ostkost specialised in food products from East Germany that had survived reunification. The new owners of Ostkost kept the shop's name, but designed a new sign (Figure 4). These days the shop still sells some GDR products, but it is mostly known for its organic food. The large 'K' in the centre of the shop's new sign was chosen by the owners because it reminds them of the GDR's biggest food chain, 'Konsum'. Konsum shops were easily recognisable by a large 'K' on the shop front. For the owners, who grew up in the GDR, the 'K' has nostalgic meaning. The sign carries an historical allusion accessible to a specific audience only – those with knowledge of the Konsum shops.

Despite their somewhat idiosyncratic content, the four signs discussed above all indicate the way linguistic landscapes mark urban spaces as belonging to specific population groups. The three shop signs in particular, regardless of individual differences, address the new residents of Prenzlauer Berg. These are the middle-class mothers and fathers, who can afford to buy organic food and high quality children's toys. Shops address specific customers not only through the goods they sell but also through their names and signs. Ratzekatz's sign for example, with its mix of bright colours and playful typeface, speaks to children and their parents. Ostkost's sign, with its choice of black on white, framed in dark red, is unusual for an organic food store and has none of the otherwise common references to nature or untreated vegetables. Its stylish design fits in well though with other signs on this street, most of which belong to restaurants, bars and fashion boutiques, responding to the lifestyles and consumer identities of the area's new residents.

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Figure 4: 'Ostkost', Lychener Strasse, December 2010

'OTHER VOICES': CIVIC PROTEST, GRAFFITI AND STREET ART BEFORE AND SINCE REUNIFICATION

Commercial signs, as seen above, dominate much of Prenzlauer Berg's LL. But there are other signs too, revealing the presence of more communitarian and political discourses in the neighbourhood.

There is a tradition of public protest in Berlin. As mentioned above, in the last years of the GDR regime, Prenzlauer Berg became an important site for the developing opposition movement. Protest activities began to be organised in the Helmholtzkiez in the 1980s, making use of public space to voice opposition to the regime and its rules. In September 1983, a church-based group of student

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activists erected wooden crosses on dead trees in the Kiez. Halbrock (2004, and personal communication 2011), one of the group's members, describes how as young people seeking an alternative to simply accepting the GDR system as it was, they engaged in environmental campaigning. The environmental consequences of the regime's economic policy were easy to see and, thus, as Halbrock and his friends believed, a good topic to engage ordinary people. As a topic for activism, it was safer than any other more direct involvement with state politics. Nevertheless, as Halbrock told me, their actions were closely observed by the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* ('Ministry for Interior Security', colloquially referred to as 'Stasi'), who immediately removed any of the crosses they found. The crosses, built by hand and painted in white, carried the message 'because of lack of assistance' (*Wegen unterlassener Hilfeleistung*) (Halbrock 2004: 104), signalling that these trees had been left to die. Halbrock and his friends intended the message to invite citizens, not the state, to take action. The crosses are part of Prenzlauer Berg's linguistic landscape before reunification, revealing that public space, despite being tightly controlled by the state, nevertheless allowed citizens' views to be expressed.

Once the wall had fallen, Prenzlauer Berg soon changed from the old working-class area into a middle-class neighbourhood. Change, though, was not welcomed by everybody. In 1992, local residents of Helmholtzkiez set up a coalition of local activists called 'We all stay' (*Wir bleiben alle*). The coalition organised street demonstrations against rental increases (Bernt and Holm 1998, 2009; Holm personal communication 2011) and protest marches against houses remaining empty (Steglich 2004). Posters carrying the *Wir bleiben alle* slogan and logo (a hand-drawn house) were put up in front of renovated houses that had been subject to high rental increases (Holm personal communication 2011).

Matthias Bernt and Andrej Holm, academics and co-founders of the WBA movement, explain that the acronym had an 'ironic double meaning' (1998: 158). Before 1990, WBA meant *Wohnbezirksausschuss*, designating the local (but state controlled) committees to oversee residential matters in the GDR. In Prenzlauer Berg, individual WBAs had been infiltrated by activists who used the committees to protest against the demolition of houses. The new slogan was intended to place the coalition in the tradition of the earlier protest movement. The different layers of meaning inherent in the interdiscursive wordplay, however, were only understandable to those familiar with the old GDR institution. The new message was intended to mirror the movement's 'egalitarian' (*egalisierende*) orientation (Bernt and Holm 1998: 158). Everybody, not just those who could pay higher rents, should be able to stay. 'We' refers to everybody who lived in the area and to the broad base of the movement which at its peak reunited a wide coalition of people from the neighbourhood, regardless of political and social orientation (Bernt and Holm 1998, 2009; Holm personal communication 2011). That they all wanted to 'stay' was seen by the initiators as the basis on which common interests could be expressed (Bernt and Holm 1998: 158). We can see from this example that public protest and conflicts

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over space are reflected in Prenzlauer Berg's linguistic landscape. Grassroots movements such as the WBA coalition use public places to attract support for their positions. The larger context against which the conflict was played out is the change from the communist system – where rents were controlled – to the capitalist democracy of the reunited Germany. Post-1990, living standards in the former East were to be gradually aligned with the rest of Germany. Rental increases were an inevitable part of this policy.

With Prenzlauer Berg rapidly gaining in popularity, over the years more and more houses and flats were refurbished and sold to new owners. Protest and opposition to the area's new gentrified character has continued to be expressed until today, although on a smaller scale and often in a more individualised way. One way of expressing discontent is through graffiti.

Tags – short writings in stylised letters – can be found widely in Prenzlauer Berg, as in many other parts of Berlin. They are visible on nearly all houses of Helmholtzkiez. To give an indication of the prevalence of graffiti in Helmholtzkiez: of the 10 houses that make up the part of Lettestrasse surrounding Helmholtzplatz, only two had no graffiti at all; two other houses had only one tag; on four houses there were between five and 10 tags; and two of the 10 houses had their ground level walls covered in innumerable tags. None of these writings had an overtly political message.

But there is also political graffiti in Helmholtzkiez. This kind of graffiti, as one former graffiti writer interviewed by Dörfler (2005: 306) confirmed, often indexes discontent with the path to development and gentrification the area has taken. An example is the slogan *Schwabe raus* ('Swabian out'), followed by the initials 'TSH', which I found in the entrance of an Asian restaurant close to Helmholtzplatz (Figure 5). These slogans became rather famous in Prenzlauer Berg in the years after renewal took shape and when many people from West Germany moved to the neighbourhood. That Swabians from the south-west of Germany were believed to have invaded Prenzlauer Berg was frequently debated in the city's local newspapers; in particular in 2008 and 2009 when the slogan appeared to be most popular. The graffito not only expresses a viewpoint (about who should live in Prenzlauer Berg) but is a way of trying to claim territory, indexing that the 'old' residents still have a voice, regardless of gentrification. Placement (cf. Scollon and Scollon 2003) is crucial to understanding the graffito's intended meaning. The slogan was pasted on the walls of a restaurant that can be easily recognised as the kind of establishment attractive to the new residents of Prenzlauer Berg. As the sign next to the graffito shows, the restaurant is called 'Asian deli' and it offers 'Pan Asian Cuisine'. The sign's reference to New York-style delicatessen shops, its choice of English as the main language and its use of the French word *cuisine* rather than 'food' (or even the German *Essen*) indicate its audience and their assumed cosmopolitan attitude. These are not the people who lived in Helmholtzkiez before reunification.

Another example is a piece of graffiti found on Dunckerstrasse, just off Helmholtzplatz: *Miethaie zu Fischstäbchen* – inviting 'Rental sharks' to become

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Figure 5: 'Schwabe raus', Lychener Strasse, December 2010

'fishfingers' – unmistakably, is a reference to house and flat owners' practice of demanding high rents. It is a commentary on gentrification, as experienced in the neighbourhood. *Miethaie* are the estate agents and property investors buying houses in Prenzlauer Berg. The common practice, as one of my informants told me, is to renovate flats and sell them as investment opportunities. Refurbished flats achieve much higher rents making them unaffordable for many of the previous tenants. *Miethaie zu Fischstäbchen* is reminiscent of *Schwerter zu Flugscharen* ('swords to ploughshares'), the famous slogan of the GDR's peace movement.

The practices of 'rental sharks' are also referred to in the next example. Although the original WBA movement (see above) is no longer active,

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Figure 6: 'Wir bleiben alle', Göhrener Strasse/Senefelder Strasse, March 2011

Wir bleiben alle is still part of today's linguistic landscape. Tenants of a building near Helmholtzplatz have pasted the slogan inside their windows in order to protest against the actions of a property investment firm who bought their building and sold its flats to new owners (Figure 6), threatening them with sharp increases in their rent. Since 2007, the tenants have collectively opposed the firm's actions, displaying posters and stickers on the walls of their house. They have, as they told me, led a 'struggle for the public' (*Kampf um die Öffentlichkeit*) against the company who took legal action to stop them from displaying their views on the building's facades.

The examples discussed in this section show that citizens, as individuals or in groups, use public space to disseminate their views. Empty walls, lamp posts or

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Figure 7: 'Sometimes love is closer than you think . . .', Stargarder Strasse, December 2010

electricity distribution boxes display people's commentary on current events and situations, be they larger political issues such as the future of nuclear energy or smaller problems such as the presence of dog shit on Helmholtzplatz. These texts are all part of the neighbourhood's linguistic landscape.

IMAGES AND WRITING: STREET ART IN PRENZLAUER BERG

Berlin is known for its street art. Books on street art in Berlin are widely available, street art is mentioned in travel guides and there is even a street art guide to Berlin (Wolbergs 2007). Street art, suffice to say here, refers to works whose use of the street is indispensable to their meaning (Riggle 2010). They may be large painted pieces or small stencils or stickers. Street art is more image-based than graffiti, although it can include writing.

In Helmholtzkiez, I have found street art on the empty side walls of buildings, in house entrances and on electrical junction boxes. On the 30 houses surrounding Helmholtzplatz alone, I found 14 pieces of street art. The works of 'El Bocho', a Berlin-based artist, are prominently displayed in the Kiez. His biggest piece, on Stargarder Strasse, a block away from Helmholtzkiez, is shown in Figures 7 and 8.

Some researchers see street art as a reaction to the overwhelming presence of commercial messages and the often bleak nature of inner city landscapes

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Figure 8: 'Romance, nowhere to be found . . .', Dunckerstrasse, February 2011

(Reinicke 2007; Borghini et al. 2010). Street art, however, does not always have anti-commercial meanings. As El Bocho told me, his primary interest is not to fight commercialisation; his art is intended 'to positively influence life in the urban space' (*das Leben im urbanen Raum positiv beeinflussen*). He wants his art to be integrated with and beautify the urban environment. The piece on Stargarder Strasse is part of a series of works entitled 'Berlin citizens' (original in English). The series is a project to 'place stories of romance in the urban landscape' (*romantische Geschichten im urbane Raum plazieren*). The main theme is 'lost romance' (*verlorene Romantik*). This is well exemplified by the two large posters made of packaging paper. They are placed on adjacent walls of a corner house, the effect being that while the viewer stands in front of one of the figures, the figure on the other poster remains invisible and yet very close. The two people are looking for romance – this is expressed, for example, in the way the woman's bare shoulder invites the viewer – but they look in opposite directions and miss each other. That the writing is in English is not unusual for El Bocho. Many of his pieces have captions written in English; this way, he explains, he can also address tourists.

The short texts, El Bocho explains, invite people's reactions and comments. They offer 'a way in' (*Einstieg*) to a story that viewers can spin for themselves. Two months after I had first seen the piece, somebody had added a simple 'but' to the writing below the man's picture. Being placed below the original image

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and art, this is not a defacement, but an addition that El Bocho welcomed as an indication of viewers engaging with his art. The work is placed on a busy junction. Because of the figures' size they are visible from afar. El Bocho describes his chosen typeface, Arial, as the 'simplest version' (*simpelste Variante*), suitable for the street because it can be read from a distance.

As with much street art, El Bocho's two murials were unauthorized, placed without the artist seeking permission from the owners of the house or the shop next to which he pasted his piece. The shop owner, though, was not at all averse to the art he found on the sides of his shop and even took pains to safeguard the murals from destruction by the winter's snow and rain. By late spring, however, they had nevertheless vanished from the walls, only a few torn pieces remaining. This, as well as the addition of a word by an unknown writer, shows the changing and malleable character of the linguistic landscape.

CONCLUSIONS

In their discussion of the linguistic landscape of Washington D.C.'s Chinatown, Leeman and Modan (2010: 182) suggest that 'in late modernity, much language in the urban landscape is both an outcome of, and a vehicle for, the commodification of space'. They argue (2010: 190) that there is no doubt that language, in addition to architecture, contributes to the 'commodified aestheticization' of neighbourhoods. Prenzlauer Berg and Helmholtzkiez are no exception, although the process is not the same as in Washington D.C.'s Chinatown. Large signs and creative slogans are not selling the area as an 'ethnoscape' like Chinatown, and there is little instrumentalisation of 'Germanness' or GDR-nostalgia for the sake of attracting visitors and residents. Instead, analysis of the linguistic landscape reveals a variety of images and themes, appealing to the distinct but related identities of fashion-oriented women, environment-conscious shoppers, mothers seeking the best for their children and tourists in search of the secret of Berlin's appeal as a modern metropolis. The signs found in Prenzlauer Berg reflect the changes that the area has experienced since reunification in 1990.

In Prenzlauer Berg, language and images are not only used to sell specific goods and services: the linguistic landscape as a whole plays a part in how the area is marketed and sold to tourists, businesses, new residents and investors alike. Photographs of shop fronts, street art and graffiti can be found in travel guides and picture books of Berlin. Real estate agents advertise using the district's beautifully restored house facades and shop fronts. Postcards of graffiti and street art in Prenzlauer Berg are widely available in shops catering for tourists. The graphic environment itself, undoubtedly, is part of what makes the neighbourhood fashionable and attractive.

Yet not all signs in Prenzlauer Berg are intentions to sell. The linguistic landscape is more diverse. In addition to several types of signs not discussed here – for example administrative signs or commemorative plaques – it includes

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street art, graffiti and political posters. There is a tradition of neighbourhood activism in Prenzlauer Berg, going back to GDR times; activists have and still place signs in the public sphere. At the time of the research in late 2010 and early 2011, housing issues were widely discussed in Berlin's major newspapers. In Prenzlauer Berg, as in many other parts of the city, rents were on the rise. A related issue was Berlin's growing success as a tourist destination, welcomed by the city's authorities but not by all its residents, partly because rental properties were increasingly being let as holiday flats. These and other issues are not only debated in the press, they are also engrained in the neighbourhood's linguistic landscape, as the above examples have shown. Linguistic landscape items are associated with 'competing claims to space' (Leeman and Modan 2009: 332). This is a debate about 'spatial justice' (Soja 2010), played out here in the question of who is allowed to live in Berlin's popular inner-city neighbourhoods (as opposed to the cheaper but less convenient suburban quarters). The present paper shows that the public sphere, although much colonized by commercial interests, remains an area for civic society and democracy, much as Habermas (1990) has called for. Political graffiti or posters and flags inviting citizens to join protests against nuclear energy (appearing increasingly on Prenzlauer Berg's streets in the aftermath of the March 2011 events in Japan), all show how important public places are for citizens' action, even in our Internet-dominated times.

Street and graffiti artists appropriate urban spaces and they question what is public and private in the urban landscape (Visconti et al. 2010) by making it their right to use the city as a canvas for their views and ideas, be they primarily artistic or more political. The previous discussion has shown that the content and placement of signs is associated with competing conceptions and visions of the city in general and Prenzlauer Berg more specifically. It is related to different groups using the streets to express their views and to argue against their opponents' perspective. Commercial interests, seemingly dominant, are not the only factor shaping the area's linguistic landscape. Berlin, as we have seen, and as sociological studies would confirm, is also a city of individual expressions and community engagement. The contextualised and diachronic approach to examining linguistic landscape developed in this paper has allowed me to show how the LL both reflects as well as shapes social change and urban development in Berlin prior to and since reunification. Central to this approach was the use of interviews, with sign producers enabling me to identify and analyse some of the different voices present in the linguistic landscape.

NOTES

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2. I did not audiotape these interviews because they were carried out in the noisy environment of a shop or café and were frequently interrupted by customers. Furthermore, taking out my recording equipment and seeking permission to use it would have introduced an undesirable level of formality to a conversation which had often developed spontaneously and informally. Interviews with neighbourhood activists were mostly tape recorded. If this was not possible, I took detailed notes which were checked and commented upon by the respondent.

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