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Linguistic Transgression in Society as Seen Through Spanish Linguistic Landscapes

≈ Abstract

The term “transgression” is traditionally associated with the infringement of what is prescribed. However, a closer look at its nature suggests that it is an integral part of the norm, as well as a starting point for innovation, in this case linguistic. The study focuses on the linguistic landscape (LL) of Spain, where five official languages share regional official status with Castilian Spanish. Further, these languages coexist in the LL with immigrant ones and English as an international language. In this environment, the article explores how linguistic transgression is reflected in the LL and what motivations underlie such non-normative uses. Given the spatial and grammatical limitations of the texts in the LL, the study focuses on aspects of code preference and orthography. To this end, we work on photographs taken in different Spanish regions which reflect the range of transgressive linguistic practices present in the public space. The evidence gathered allows us to suggest the grouping of these techniques under the categories of code (or variant) choice/elimination, exoticisation, re-representation and re-signification. The subsequent analysis presents linguistic transgression in LL as a voluntary, motivated and intentional social act that reflects identity, socio-cultural, but also commercial motivations. These motivations lead street-text authors to force the linguistic norm in their texts in order to claim their identity, show their solidarity with ideologies, resist linguistic policies or seek identification with their audience’s sensitivities for trade purposes.

Keywords:

Linguistic landscape; transgression; written systems; language choice; Spain

≈ Resumen

El término “transgresión” se asocia tradicionalmente a la infracción de lo prescrito. Sin embargo, una aproximación más detallada a su naturaleza sugiere que se trata de una parte integral de la norma, así como un punto de partida para la innovación, en este caso lingüística. El estudio se centra en el paisaje lingüístico de España, donde comparten oficialidad regional con el castellano distintas lenguas oficiales. Estas además comparten el LL con lenguas inmigrantes y el inglés, como lengua internacional. En este entorno, el artículo indaga sobre cómo se refleja la transgresión lingüística en el paisaje lingüístico y qué motivaciones subyacen a tales usos no normativos. Dadas la limitación espacial y gramatical de los textos en el PL, el estudio se centra en los aspectos de preferencia de código y ortográficos. Para ello se trabaja sobre fotografías tomadas en distintas regiones españolas, que reflejan el abanico de prácticas lingüísticas transgresoras presentes en el espacio público. Las evidencias recopiladas permiten sugerir el agrupamiento de dichas técnicas bajo las categorías de elección/eliminación de lengua o sus variantes, exotización, re-representación y re-significación. Su posterior análisis presenta la transgresión lingüística en el PL como un acto social voluntario, motivado e intencionado que permite reflejar motivaciones identitarias, socioculturales, pero también comerciales. Dichas motivaciones llevan a los autores de los textos a forzar la norma lingüística en sus textos con objeto reivindicar su identidad, mostrar su solidaridad con ideologías, resistirse a políticas lingüísticas o bien buscar la identificación con su audiencia con fines comerciales.

Palabras clave:

Paisaje lingüístico; transgresión; sistemas escritos; elección de código; España

The term “transgression” commonly evokes images of rule infringement in an authoritative relation between convention and performance. However, a closer approach suggests that reducing transgression to undermining what is established falls short of its deeper nature. John Jervis notes:

[transgression] is not, in itself, subversion; it is not an overt and deliberate challenge to the status quo. What it does do, though, is implicitly interrogate the law, pointing not just to the specific, and frequently arbitrary, mechanisms of power on which it rests – despite its universalizing pretensions – but also to its complicity, its involvement in what it prohibits. (1999, 4)

Transgression then surpasses “aggression” to become a social act of exploration beyond the limits of the socially agreed (Pennycook 2007). Just like norms call for compliance, their very existence motivates their questioning, establishing a reciprocal relationship between convention and challenge that is unnatural to social interaction.

Language is conventional. From this standpoint, transgression may be approached as a circumvention of sociocultural convention or authorisation. But, unlike error, an unintentional “deviation from the norms of the target language” (Ellis 1994, 51), transgression is intentional. Intentionality seems to be key to distinguishing transgression from error; as Carl James concludes, “an error arises only when there was no intention to commit one. One cannot spot so-called ‘deliberate’ errors because they do not exist” (2013, 77). Language is also a social institution and so is its use in the public space. Communities have ceded public institutions the ownership of the public space and the power to establish what is acceptable or not (Blommaert 2013, 38–49). This eventually breeds power tensions between the “owner” of the space and its users. Such relations are not self-evident; policies and regulations vary according to political agendas, as Peter Backhaus (2009) documents. It must be noted, though, with Susana Rodríguez and Fernando Ramallo (2015), that ownership and the eventual “power relation” is not a top-down flow exclusively, as sociocultural groups and movements may exert bottom-up power when they spray their neighbourhoods to mark their territories. This fact reminds us that the public space has historically been a democratic environment for written expression that favours a more living use of language and message display by groups with no other pulpit from where to express themselves. The Linguistic Landscape (LL henceforth), then, becomes a practical showcase of transgressive sensitivities in society and language evolution.

Linguistic Transgression and the Linguistic Landscape

Signs on display are embedded in the public space they help to construct. As Ron Scollon and Suzanne Scollon conclude, the use of language in the public space is “socioculturally authorised” (2003, 154). Each society regulates where and how text is acceptable in the LL. The former, where, out of the scope of this paper for space reasons, has generated interest in LL literature since “there is in each community some geosemiotic system which tells members where signs and messages may appropriately appear and where they may not” (Scollon and Scollon 2003, 148–9).

Our interest, nonetheless, is with the latter, how; this is, the way different semiotic codes intertwine to generate meaning. Since LL texts are characterised for their multimodal character (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996), this is a rather broad term. Therefore, we will concentrate on the exploration of language on display beyond linguistic convention.

Texts in the Public Space


Street texts differ from other instances of language use. Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorter state that “the public space has its own rules and regulations, which are often unique as they tend to defy declared policies” (2009, 3). Such self-regulatory capacity seems to anticipate Vivian Cook’s focused claim of the uniqueness of language on display by noting that “the language of the street is not a reduced elliptical version of the written language but a genre that stands on its own feet” (2013, 77). The specific functions and physical features of these texts manifest in a language use that, as Jeffrey L. Kallen warns, “is not necessarily correlated with mother-tongue loyalty of everyday use of language” (2016, 365). Among the social reasons behind this mismatch, the literature has devoted specific attention to conflict and protest (Rubdy and Ben Said 2015; Blackwood, Lanza and Woldemariam 2016) and analysed how – among others – top-down normalisation policies have motivated bottom-up resistance practices against linguistic homogeneity that range from code-choice strategies, including techniques to circumvent linguistic legislation (Pavlenko 2012) and orthographic innovation (Sebba 2003).

Linguistic transgression may take as many forms as writing conventions, grammar and syntax a language has. Nonetheless, sought communicative immediacy and the frame-constrained nature of LL texts limits syntactic complexity and make elaborate structures comparatively scarcer, limiting them to brief clauses or wordlists. This being so, we will focus on aspects of orthographic transgression and code choice.

Orthographic Transgression

Writing systems and unconventional spelling in the LL have received scant attention. Noticeable exceptions include Kallen’s insight of non-normative spelling, punctuation marks and cross-linguistic influence (2016). Cook (2014) disentangles the differences between street and standard punctuation and shows how the sparing use that street signs make of punctuation, rather than erroneous, is aligned with their peculiar, restricted grammar. As evidenced by Cook’s account of transgressive spellings in English (2004), morphophonemic orthographies seem to favour spelling transgression. Spanish orthography, on the contrary, is largely phonemic, which a priori hinders associated spelling transgression. Nonetheless, instances of non-normative orthography occur in the LL and reach extreme manifestations with the compositional interaction of linguistic and iconic elements (Calvi 2018) in a kind of “visual hybridity” (Kallen 2016) that contributes to the meaning-generating capacity of language on display.

Code Choice

Scollon and Scollon (2003) open their analysis of place semiotics with the study of code preference “when there are two or more languages or codes used in a picture” (2003, xii). We will distinguish it from “code choice”, i.e., the selection of 

~ a language or variant, thus excluding others. Neither code preference nor choice are random. They arise from the associations that languages generate in society to the extent that they may become a vehicle to “assert power (by controlling the languages of the sign, I declare power over the space designated) or to claim solidarity or identity (my statement of socio-cultural membership is in the language I have chosen)” (Spolsky and Cooper 1991, 84).

When a group adopts their language or variant as its vehicle for interaction, its use is unmarked, free from additional symbolism. The opposite occurs when community members choose a non-conventionalised language or variant to spread their message (see Myers-Scotton [1993]). The choice then acquires connotations. This is the case in bilingual territories where language policies favour the use of one language: social dissent manifests itself in the unauthorised use of marked languages or scripts (Backhaus 2009; Moriarty 2014; Pavlenko 2009; Pavlenko 2012), bivalent words (Pavlenko 2012), wordplays (Lamarre 2014) or by exerting more radical strategies such as “language erasure”, i.e., the “deliberate removal of signage in a particular language” (Pavlenko 2009, 255). But in the era of global media sign authors want to target as wide a readership as possible. In so doing, the marked choice of an international language to deliver a message may be felt as transgressive, as it contradicts the linguistically expectable in a given territory. English, in its contemporary lingua-franca role, is possibly the language that best illustrates this strategy.

Languages in the Spanish LL

Up to 14% of Spaniards have one of the country’s five officially-recognised regional languages (Aranese, Basque, Catalan, Galician and Valencian) as their mother tongue.¹ The dynamics of their coexistence in the LL with Spanish, the country’s official language, have been studied in the cases of Basque (Gorter, Aiestaran and Cenoz 2012), Catalan (Comajoan and Long 2012; Bruyèl and Juan-Garau 2015), Galician (Kakihara 2013; Wellings 2014; Lago, Silva and Gómez 2020) and Valencian (Lado 2011), among others. Three other minority languages, despite being regionally protected by law, still do not enjoy official status: Aragonese (Aragón 2013), Asturian (Principado de Asturias 1998) and Leonese (Spain 2013).² Scholarly research has confirmed the scarcity of Asturian in signage and the militant struggle for its introduction (Sebastian 2019) or the vindictory presence of Aragonese in the LL (Félez 2017). In addition to these, a growing body of research addresses the role of immigrant languages as new constituents of the Spanish LL. Mónica Castillo and Daniel Sáez (2011) or Lola Pons (2012) offer more encompassing perspectives of immigrant languages on display, while recent studies specifically focus on Chinese (Ma 2017) or Arabic (Moustaoui 2018). This linguistic diversity and regional legislative heterogeneity in the regulation of the public space contributes to shaping the country’s LL, where transgressive choices are willingly made to reveal a myriad of demands, ideology and social adhesions (Rodríguez and Ramallo 2015).

In light of the above, we will take the debate on linguistic transgression in the Spanish LL to enquire (a) how linguistic transgression reflects in the LL and (b) what motivations underlie non-normative uses in the Spanish LL.

An Overview of Linguistic Transgression in the Spanish LL

In order to document non-normative linguistic uses in the Spanish LL, between 2017 and 2019 we visited different Spanish cities in monolingual and officially bilingual regions. In order to provide a qualitative overview of the matter of study across this multilingual country, we considered signs that included texts in Basque, Castilian Spanish and Catalan, as well as English in the regions of Asturias (Arriondas), Catalonia (Barcelona), the Basque Country (Bilbao, Barrika and Mondragón/Arrasate), Castile and Leon (Burgos), Andalusia (Cadiz and Jerez), La Rioja (Logroño) and the Balearic Islands (Palma). In the course of random strolls through the cities visited, we documented not only bottom-up, but also top-down signs, as the latter were felt as susceptible to transgressive practices in protest against official language policies. The different practices observed were grouped under the categories of code erasure, exoticization, re-representation and re-signification. We will use “code erasure” for the conscious deletion of a given language or variant. We will refer to “exoticization” as the orthographic non-normative conversion of an ordinary word into a more exotic form in order to invest the signified with symbolic associations. Finally, “re-signification” will refer to the process by which an existing signifier acquires a new meaning or is reshaped to match emerging meanings and values.

Code Erasure

Code choice generates transgression in bilingual regions when top-down policies and bottom-up sensitivities differ. Language erasure (Pavlenko 2009) then manifests in different ways. Illustration 1 below illustrates code deletion in the Basque Country, where Spanish is co-official with Basque. The road sign shown, *Mondragón/Arrasate*, complies with the law whereby road signs in the region must be bilingual (Spain 2012). However, the Spanish version of the toponym, *Mondragón*, has been sprayed on. This leaves only Basque *Arrasate* in a bottom-up activist attempt to erase physical presence of the majority language, perceived as hegemonic.



Illustration 1

Illustration 2 illustrates modification (Pavlenko 2009) of diatopic variants. Palma is the capital of the Balearic Islands, where Castilian Spanish is co-official with Catalan, which has a local variant. In the 1980s the municipal government normalised toponyms leaving standard Catalan as the only official form for street names (Illes Balears 1987). The exclusion of the local variant from the street directory was contested by speakers who identify with it. Illustration 2 reflects this debate: a first layer, at the top, retains the former road's name, *Carrer de s'aigo* [Water Street], in the local variety of Catalan. Below, a more modern plaque reads *Carrer de laigua*, in standard Catalan. On a third layer, scribbled on the new text, we see the locally dialectal (Grimalt 2009) <S> article and <O> to modify the word's ending, in an act of resistance to claim its reintroduction.



Illustration 2

Comparable phenomena are observable in other bilingual territories. As documented by various scholars (Lago, Silva and Gómez 2020; Screti 2018) vindicatory inscriptions in Galicia use reintegrationist spelling, not supported by the Real Academia Galega, which advocates for the reintegration of Galician in the Galician-Portuguese diatopic group. Francesco Screti (2018) illustrates this struggle with the toponym *La Coruña* (Spanish), which coexists with officialist (*A Coruña*) and reintegrationist (*A Corunha*) variations of the toponym.

English is a frequent, global loudspeaker of vindication. It enters the LL as the vehicle of slogans in demonstrations even in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt (Shiri 2015; Ben Said and Kasanga 2016), where it is a foreign language. Spain is not an exception. Illustration 3 below shows English as a preferred choice for political claims in Catalonia (left) and the Basque Country (right). Despite ranking third after Spanish and Catalan in the LL of Barcelona (Comajoan 2013), the text on the left shows that English is chosen to campaign for Catalonia's independence. In the same vein, on the picture on the right, the selection of English suggests a deliberate communication strategy addressed to the foreign public opinion and intended to confer pro-independence claims an international echo.



Illustration 3

On occasion, the symbolic power of English outweighs its informative function. Understanding takes second place and “vogue” English (Curtin 2009) contributes to the construction of a specific atmosphere through its positive associations. Illustration 4 shows a baker's billboard in Logroño. The text combines Spanish *pan* [bread] and English *coffee*. Although the latter is close to Spanish *café*, therefore not hindering understanding, local scarcity of non-Spanish speakers makes English text unnecessary. When the business owner was enquired about his motivations, his reply that “the text would read more sophisticated and attract a better clientele” suggests that English was chosen to be seen, rather than read.



Illustration 4

Exoticization

Sign authors may gain the readers' attention by seeking the linguistic representation of the ordinary as exotic. In the process, the ordinary is endowed with the values of the sought reference. As noted by Kallen (2016), this phenomenon is common in multilingual settings where multilingualism, either “community-based” or deriving from the association of specific values to a given language, occurs. The contact between Spain's regional languages and majority languages, mainly Spanish and English, gives rise to this type of hybrids that frequently seek the generation of associations of authenticity or quality.

Basque, the official language of the Basque Country, in northern Spain, illustrates this point. Illustration 5 reproduces a notice outside an inn in the southernmost region of Cadiz. The text lists various snacks, all spelled in standard Spanish except for *pintxos*, which substitutes standard Spanish <ch> digraph in *pinchos* with <tx>, in-existent in Spanish but widely recognised as Basque in other Spanish regions. Caterers draw on Basque reputation

for excellent cooking to surpass the limits of standard Spanish spelling by introducing traces of Basque spelling that activate positive associations.



Illustration 5

Orthographic exoticization may also emanate from ethnographic or local identification when standard spelling is altered to reflect vernacular pronunciation. Toponyms offer examples of this kind of bottom-up regional identification. Illustration 6 below reflects such cases. The local accent in Madrid is known for substituting final /-d/ sound for /-z/. As a result, the pronunciation of the city's name becomes /mɑ'drɪz/. This local realisation then reaches spelling when businesses like the café in Illustration 6 (top) want to express their self-identification or authenticity.

Certain Andalusian accents shift liquid consonants /l/ for /r/ and drop final /s/. This shift is not reflected in writing unless there is an intention to highlight adherence to regional references. Illustration 6 (middle) reproduces the outdoor plaque of a bar named after Seville's soccer club, *Real Betis Balompié*, for short *El Betis*. This becomes 'Er Beti', both reflecting the local liquid substitution and the drop of the final phoneme. The sign's author is well aware of the non-standard character of such spelling, which explains the introduction of quotation marks enclosing the bar's name.



Illustration 6

Identity and resistance combine in Illustration 6 (bottom) showing two parking meters in Jerez de la Frontera. The standard spelling of the city's name, *Jerez* /xe'reθ/, is found on the left, while on the right local militants in favour of adapting the city's name to the local pronunciation have peeled off the final <-z>, which corresponds to the final /θ/ phoneme, habitually dropped by local speakers.

Exoticisation also reaches punctuation marks. Spanish orthography restricts apostrophe use to a philological or literary graphic indication of the elision of a vocalic sound between two words (Real Academia Española y Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española 2010). However, its use to elide vowels within a word is spreading in street texts. Intra-word vowels are replaced by an apostrophe when the elided vocalic sound coincides with the pronunciation of the preceding consonant in isolation. As a result, spelling reproduces exotic patterns geared to generating modern, cosmopolitan associations. Illustration 7 below reproduces the name of a snack bar in Palma where *Delirios* (frenzy) becomes *D'lirios*. The alteration of spelling resulting from the vowel elision affects neither pronunciation nor, consequently, understanding.



Illustration 7

In the search for cosmopolitan associations, exoticisation by apostrophising reaches possessive structures. English possessive <'s> is introduced when this resource is alien to Spanish grammar. The expected wording in Illustration 8 would be *Bar Madrid*, however, possessive <'s> is introduced and word order inverted to make *Bar* precede *Madrid's*. Correctness here is not relevant as long as the symbolic association is achieved: the Spanish text "looks" cosmopolitan and benefits from the associations generated.

Re-Representation

As Calvi (2018) remarks, the combination of linguistic symbols with icons is a constituent ingredient of the LL. Although multimodality is out of our scope, this claim justifies our attention to how linguistic exoticisation reaches extreme manifestations by incorporating non-linguistic symbols that replace graphemes or syllables. This visual re-representation of the signified is not arbitrary but eased by the symbol introduced, which is iconic of the signified object or action, or reminiscent in shape with the character(s) replaced. The result is a creative hybrid intended to make the text memorable.

The contemporary concern for inclusive language has eased the appearance of creative formulas to supersede feminine <-a> and masculine <-o> endings to avoid gender distinction, especially in the plural, where masculine <-os> includes both genders. Solutions to avoid gender expressions have included word duplications, non-binary vowel replacements by <-e>, but also <x> or non-letters like <@>, whose shape seems to incorporate the <-o> and <-a> endings. As Illustration 11 shows, synthetic forms such as *peluquer@s* are preferred when frame limitations discard longer options such as *peluqueros y peluqueras* [hairdressers].



Illustration 11

Character substitution is frequent in business names, where images introduced are iconic of the business name or its nature. Illustration 12 (top) combines a comb and scissors to form a <k> in the hairdresser's name, *Kerania*. This makes clear that the business is a hairdresser's, rendering partially unnecessary the *peluquería y barbería* [hairdresser and barber's] expander underneath. The middle picture reproduces a pub name in Celtic typeface, *Flor de Escocia* [flower of Scotland], in Burgos. The <-o> has been replaced by an icon of a thistle, which combined with the text reinforces a message of genuineness. This phenomenon is equally observable in the country's bilingual territories. Illustration 12 (bottom) reproduces an optician's billboard in Bilbao (*Bilbo* in Basque). The final <o> in *Bilbo* and the initial <o> in *Optika* have been substituted with the rims and bridge of a pair of glasses. The indexical meaning is reinforced by a change of colour between the actual letters, in blue, and the glasses, in red.



Illustration 8

When attempting to exoticise Spanish text, sign authors may reproduce known errors in English. As can be seen in Illustration 9, the plural form *peluqueros* [hairdressers] has been forced into *peluquero's*, where final <-o> is separated from the plural <-s> ending by an apostrophe. It is unlikely that the author sought a literal translation of English (singular) "hairdresser's", since the reference, *J&M*, is plural. Thus, the intrusive apostrophe lies analogous to the greengrocer's apostrophe, found in English (Cook 2014) but inexistent in Spanish.



Illustration 9

Finally, unlike Aranese, Basque or Catalan,³ the Spanish punctuation system demands the introduction of opening exclamation (!) and question (?) marks. In the last years, street texts (Illustration 10) have echoed the simplifying practice of dropping these marks that is common in informal instant messaging. The result is a perceived international look of expressions that would otherwise look too local.



Illustration 10



Illustration 12

Visual hybridity goes further when numbers or icons – i.e., rebuses – represent words or parts of words. Illustration 13 reproduces instances of both cases. At the top, a window reproduces a restaurant's name in Mallorca: *o es 3*. The wordplay is revealed by the clarifying expander: *Zero Es Tres* (eventually *cero estrés* [zero stress]) also in non-standard spelling. Illustration 13 (bottom) shows a complex rebus in Barcelona. The original Catalan text *reciclem* [let's recycle] is combined with an icon representing a bicycle, *bicicleta*, shortened as *bici* [bike]. The resulting rebus clarifies that the workshop recycles bicycles. Interpreting the resulting “word” becomes more demanding for the reader as the text is to be read *rebiciclem* (from *reciclem* + *bici*).



Illustration 13

Re-Signification

The LL has the potential to showcase on-going orthography trends that may become standard in the future. On occasion, such trends arise from the intentional alteration of the conventional signifier-signified relationship. Emerging cultural and ideological movements do not overlook the aesthetics of catchy spelling solutions, sometimes with associated semantic transformations: thus, the intervention on the signifier entails a process of re-signification of the signified.

In Spanish, the /k/ phoneme corresponds to two different graphemes: <c> when followed by <a>, <o> or <u> and <qu-> when preceding <e> and <i>. Since letter <k> is mostly restricted to non-romance words, its inclusion incorporates cultural and ideological associations. When transgression is associated to nonconformity, <c> and <qu-> have been replaced with <k>, gaining perceived aggressiveness, as evidenced by its adoption by counter-cultural movements like squatting, whose labelling term results from this orthographic twist. The original spellings *ocupar* ([to occupy] and then [to squat]) and *ocupante* ([occupant] and then [squatter]) became *okupar* and *okupa*. This new spelling initially adopted for self-identification was so extensively used in graffiti and flyers that society associated it to squatting. The Spanish *Diccionario de la lengua española* incorporated *okupar* and *okupa* with a distinct meaning in 2014 (Real Academia Española 2014). This innovation is also found in the country's minority languages. Illustration 14 below, taken in Barcelona, reproduces the Catalan text *CSOA centre social okupat autogestionat* [squattered, self-managed CSOA social centre], where the word *okupat* (originally, *ocupat*) illustrates how linguistic proximity between Catalan and Spanish allows an identical orthographic twist.



Illustration 14

Visual impact and its association to nonconformity have expanded to signage addressing a younger readership. This use is shown in Illustration 15. Above, *cubata* – the substandard, shortened form designating a rum and cola mixed drink (*cubalibre*) – is re-spelled *kubata*, which indexes the same drink but adds connotative meaning. Below, the adjective “casual” on a clothing shop's billboard, is re-spelled with an initial <k-> in a clear address to a public who will expect to find younger fashion.



Illustration 15

Finally, substitution has also reached full words. This is the common case of particles *que* and *qué*, replaced by <k>, and preposition *por*, substituted with the letter <x> and pronounced as its homophone, the mathematical multiplication symbol. This is favoured by its shape, reminiscent of a cross in diagonal orientation, which has been associated not only to opposition or prohibition but also to the “unknown, mysterious, aberrant, and potentially menacing” (Jaworski 2019, 117). Illustration 16 below reproduces such defiant spirit: the substandard oath *por mis muertos* [[I swear] on my dead ancestors] becomes *x mis muertos*.



Illustration 16

Discussion

How Does Linguistic Transgression Reflect in the LL?

A social conception of this shared urban space has led our communities to cede its ownership to authorities that, in turn, licence the public emplacement of signage and the codes chosen. It follows that top-down regulation sets the acceptable, then the expectable.

Public spaces, Shohamy remarks, become an arena where multiple actors conduct “their battles for power, control, national identity, recognition and self-expression” (2006, 111). The dialectic established between such actors turns the public space into a heavily semiotised environment where visual stimuli compete to make messages visible. Physical framing limitations leave little room for syntactic flourishes and the short time that passers-by glance at any one sign does not make getting their attention any easier. In response, sign authors explore other semiotic systems to make their sign catch the attention of the passers-by. As seen above, bending linguistic conventions with marked code choices or orthographic twists seems to confer symbolic value and constitutes a shocking, immediate identifier at the service of actors interested in marking sociolinguistic territories – such is the case in the bilingual settings – or seeking visibility for reasons which may be ideological, as in inclusive language solutions of countercultural movements, or even commercial, as in shop banners.

In this light, transgression is an inherent part of the LL, both on protest or claiming grounds, and as a manifestation of interests that reach the strictly commercial. Limiting its enquiry to the legitimate leaves out a good share of what language on display can tell us about our communities.

Code choice stands as an initial vehicle for transgression. Just like the adoption of certain languages or variants indexes the author’s affiliations, their deliberate exclusion or erasure reveal sensitivities that are felt as transgressive when they contravene regulations or convention. In this light, language erasure techniques are not an exclusively top-down strategy. They become acts of bottom-up identity vindication and linguistic resistance when local speakers scribble characters on street placards in Mallorca or delete them in Bilbao. As seen, processes of code erasure, re-representation and re-signification may reflect identity tensions in Spanish territories where languages or diatopic variants coexist, and the LL becomes the arena where such issues are settled, often evidencing differences between top-down policies and bottom-up feelings. As an act of linguistic resistance, transgression is meaningful in itself and becomes a marker of linguistic otherness when languages co-exist in inequality. At a national scale, the nationalisation (Shohamy 2006) of standard Castilian Spanish grants it a higher status, which eventually confronts social identities and raises acts of linguistic resistance. Defenders of regional languages reject “Castilianness” by crossing out inscriptions or parts of them to re-scrrawl them in the local language or variant. Regionally, local resistance to standard variants such as those documented in Mallorca (Mallorcan Catalan vs. standard Catalan) reveal the conflict arising from standardisation, as this “implies the imposition of specific uniform and homogeneous norms” (Shohamy 2006, 63) opposed to everyday speech behaviour. The issue is not one of comprehension – Majorcans understand normalised Catalan – but of diatopic opposition and local linguistic identity. It must be said, nonetheless, that the introduction of regional normalisation policies, protective of local languages, are bound to make these cases increasingly infrequent. In the meantime different text layers provide an interesting diachronic perspective of social sensitivities.

The documented choice of English in signage follows from its global spread and the connotations it raises. English inscriptions in settings where English has no socio-educational setting become marked and transgressive in as much as English is not the conventionalised or licensed code.⁴ In Spain, this is the case in at least three circumstances. First, when social groups choose English to spread political premises with the twofold intention of (a) ideologically distancing themselves from the conventionally expectable code and, more instrumentally, (b) making their message accessible to a global audience. Such would be the case in Illustration 3, where the choice of English not only excludes Spanish, representative of the country from which independence is demanded, but also makes the message accessible to an international readership through the media. Second, English illustrates the creative divorce of language from meaning when it becomes an atmospheric element of the public space. But our evidence also showcases the opposite case, in which local languages are exoticised by incorporating English-looking features, such as apostrophes, to multiply their captivating potential while still being decipherable by the local readership.

A good deal of the communicative force of language on display resides in its transcendence of the informative, making the decisions adopted by sign authors symbolic. In this light, the threefold perspective of attribution (Sebba 2015), iconisation (Irvine and Gal 2000) and branding may offer a suitable framework for the analysis of unexpected orthographies in the LL. First, attribution consists in the association of specific linguistic features with a perceived group, endowed with certain

values. This explains why the restaurant owner in southern Spain opts for the Basque <tx> digraph. It immediately transfers values associated to Basque gastronomy to the product offered. Second, certain characters may become iconic representations of ideological or social ideologies. This is the case of <k>, which acquires countercultural symbolism in what Mark Sebba labels as “the anarchist k” (2003, 158). In a similar vein, possibly emerging from indeterminacy, <x> and <@> have become common resources of non-sexist language practitioners for whom these or the duplicate form *bienvenidos y bienvenidas* or non-binary *bienvenides* are preferable to inclusive plural masculines (Bosque 2012). Finally, iconisation, and specially attribution, are not incompatible with branding, whereby a salient orthographic feature is strategically promoted as the “brand” of a group and its attributes. The democratisation of bottom-up signage allows in-group members to brand the public space with their linguistic peculiarity beyond the norm; thus, Madrid becomes *Madriz* or Jerez becomes *Jere*, not only claiming local identity, but turning difference into a promotional resource.

What Motivations Underlie Linguistic Transgression in the Spanish LL?

Linguistic transgression is not random but motivated, deliberate and purposeful. First, it is motivated. When Valerie Barker et al. elaborate on the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality, they remind us that “language becomes a focal point for dissent when dominant groups feel a sense of insecurity because they fear what they perceive as increased language vitality of the ethnic and social groups” (2001, 6). This effect may not be unknown to linguistic resistance or counter-cultural movements and amplifies the echo of their positions by granting them street-level visibility, while otherwise they would be confined to communication channels addressing like-minded readership. Furthermore, as Sebba (2003) claims, we are not shocked at hearing swearwords in everyday conversation, while we are at misspelled words. Hence, the visual impact caused by transgressive spelling solutions and visual hybrids favours their introduction in signage as an eye-catching device with underlying ideological, identity or commercial motivations. In parallel, the spread of social networks and instant messaging has democratised public writing and eased the use of reductions, non-letters and resources alike that have eventually reached street texts. Second, transgression is intentional, as sign authors know that their “presumed reader” (Spolsky and Cooper 1991, 84) will react to the adopted strategies. This establishes a threefold interaction between sign author, text and presumed reader (Scollon and Scollon 2003) in the construction of meaning, but also with unaddressed readers, who may feel questioned just through the “how” of the text, rather than the “what”. Finally, the voluntary act of transcending the norm is purposeful. On the one hand, linguistic transgression in the LL arises from the capacity of written texts to shape the public space around us. As Jacky J. Lou eloquently summarises, “words have the power to turn a space into a place” (2007, 174). Awareness of the power of language to construct spaces explains resistance practices such as language erasure or text scrawling in territories such as Mallorca or Galicia, where competing diatopic variants claim their legitimacy over the territory. On the other hand, transgressive practices pursue an impact on the readers. While aprioristic approaches to transgression regard it as parallel to illegitimacy, non-normative uses of language become acceptable in the understanding that the aim justifies the means: compounds, portmanteaus (as in *rebiciclem*), character replacements (as in *peluquer@s*) and other

conspicuous expressions succeed in catching the eye of the passer-by and make texts and their references memorable.

From Transgression to Innovation

Restricting transgression to a norm-breaching reaction to social conventions overlooks that transgression lies at the root of language change. As Alastair Pennycook notes, “transgression may be seen as the desire to go beyond, to think otherwise, to transcend the boundaries of the modern” (2007, 41) and, we may add, such desire stems from ideological, identity or trade motivations, which lead to innovating by pushing the limits of what is often established with no other justification than normative convention. The LL reveals itself as a tangible indicator of ongoing change, but also as a tool for change itself. The democratising nature of LL representations places them at the forefront of the evolution of written language. Transgressive spellings such as *okupar* are, as Croft suggests, an “unintended causal effect of an intended human social action” (2000, 59). Innovation is the perceivable result of a social – rather than individual – process whereby change is promoted and extensively implemented in society. It is through social acceptance of innovative orthographies (and meanings) that *okupar* entered the *Diccionario de la lengua española*. Indeed, when authors substitute <c> for <k> or <o> for <@> they aim to give their social ideology a visual, emplaced shape identifying the group against the others. The written language becomes the surface manifestation of deeper social evolution with new cultures and sensitivities appearing.

Conclusion

Beyond challenging the norm, linguistic transgression itself generates meaning. It is a symptom of underlying social vitality and interests, and a powerful tool to express the questioning of the established or taken for granted.

We have addressed linguistic transgression in the LL as a social, purposeful phenomenon not comparable to error. Given the restricted grammar of street texts, we have illustrated the linguistic processes that underlie the intentional introduction of non-conventional or creative orthography to conclude that their enhanced visibility in the LL is a loudspeaker for linguistic resistance, but also a vehicle for language innovation. Nonetheless, meaning generation in the LL is multimodal and so is transgression. Further research should address the range of semiotic features that may become transgressive by surpassing the boundaries of convention in order to channel social sensitivities of various kinds.⁵

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Notes

¹ Valencian is the name given to the variety of Catalan spoken in the Valencian Autonomous Community. Lado (2011) concludes that the debate whether Valencian and Catalan are the same languages is political rather than philological.

² On 11 March 2021 the Spanish Parliament passed a motion to request the government to give Asturian and Aragonese regional official status.

³ Both Valencian (Acadèmia Valenciana de la Llengua 2006)

and Galician (Real Academia Galega 2012) allow their use to ease reading and avoid ambiguity. In the case of Catalan, in 1993 the lack of a clear norm led the Institut d'Estudis Catalans to conclude that opening question and exclamation marks should not be used (1996).

⁴ Rubdy (2015) documents the opposite case in Mumbai. The dominance of English in graffiti, and not Marathi or Hindi, is explained by the cross-cutting presence of English in that society and the existence of a bilingual community of speakers of either Marathi or Hindi, but with English as a common language.

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Título:

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